Culture, Place and Development

Ideas for driving development through culture and creativity for the benefit of local people and places

Key Cities
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Network

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Cover: Bishop Toby Howarth and Professor Udy Archibong present "New narratives for Bradford" at the Bradford Conference, November 2024. All Bradford Conference pictures by Kiran Mehta.

Key Cities is a diverse cross-party network of 25 cities and towns across England and Wales that represents urban UK. With a combined population of more than six million contributing in excess of £150 billion to the economy, it includes some of the fastest-growing local economies in the country. Key Cities champions its places to unlock devolution, deliver prosperity and protect the environment.

www.keycities.uk

The Key Cities Innovation Network was formed in 2022 to foster scalable innovation and new approaches to the challenges and opportunities of urban UK today. The Network currently comprises 12 universities working with the 25 Key Cities and the members of the Key Cities All-Party Parliamentary Group. The university members are:

University of Bath
University of Bradford
Coventry University
University of Essex
Lancaster University
University of Lincoln
University of Plymouth
University of Salford
University of South Wales
University of Southampton
Staffordshire University
Wrexham University

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"Innovation Districts" — Salford, 26-27 November 2025

Call for papers

Registration

In three years, the Key Cities Innovation Network has grown into a powerful catalyst for civic collaboration. Born from a belief that meaningful change is best driven at the intersection of local government, universities, communities and other stakeholders, the network has become a proving ground for place-based innovation.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the work showcased here, in our second compendium of peer-reviewed papers and case studies contributed by member universities and cities. Developed from ideas discussed at our Conference in Bradford last November, each of these contributions presents an innovation that is sustainable and scalable, developed in partnership within a city or region (and some with other places), and highlighting how culture helps to secure beneficial outcomes.

At a time when growth through agglomeration and local government reorganisation are central to government strategy, community is crucial to ensuring public engagement and inclusive development. While innovation is always desirable, new ideas are more important than ever when the financial resilience of local authorities – still by far the largest funders of culture – is under unprecedented strain. Culture and innovation, when co-designed with communities, are upstream investments that hold the promise of significant return for local authorities by impacting development and wellbeing in ways that can cut through deep-rooted cycles of inequality.

As this compendium shows, cultural identity, heritage, and creativity are not abstract concepts. They are forces that shape how people relate to where they live, what they aspire to, and how they engage with one another. Across the 25 cities that make up our network, culture is being mobilised as a driver of inclusive growth, community wellbeing, and civic renewal.

These stories are the product of an evolving dialogue across our cities – between academic researchers, local councils, artists, practitioners, faith leaders, and community organisations. Taken together, they demonstrate the diversity and depth of ideas around culture-led development that are being explored and implemented across the country. These contributions are not theoretical exercises; they are rooted in lived experience and shaped by urgent local needs.

Earlier this year, a report on coastal communities produced by the Innovation Network[1] laid bare the structural challenges that continue to hold back many of Britain's ports and coastal areas. That report proposed a new policy framework to re-centre these places in the national strategy for growth and renewal. This compendium explores an important parallel dimension: the cultural ecosystems that underpin strong, inclusive places.

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1   Key Cities Innovation Network (2025). *On the waterfront*. Available at: https://keycities.uk/2025/03/10/on-the-waterfront-report-on-coastal-communities/

A consistent thread is that cultural development works best when it is built from the ground up. Whether it's in Salford's decade-long cultural partnership, Bradford's interfaith civic narrative, or the participatory mapping work in Southampton, the projects profiled here emphasise listening first, then building together. They show how culture and creativity can unlock pride, trust, and belonging – especially when public institutions share power with the people they serve.

The Bradford Conference, which brought many of these ideas into the spotlight, stood as a powerful moment of reflection and ambition. It brought together cultural leaders, local authorities, academics and community organisers, united in the belief that regeneration is best rooted in the identity of place. It is no coincidence that this conversation took place in a city that was preparing to step onto the national stage as UK City of Culture 2025 with a programme that is people-powered both in design and delivery.

Culture, Place and Development offers not just analysis, but a way forward with stories that present a practical and hopeful account of how place-based cultural strategies can be designed and delivered collaboratively. This compendium provides ideas that other cities – within and beyond our network – can adapt to their own situation.

It also reinforces the role that universities play in civic life, as conveners, research partners, and cultural anchors. They of-fer tools for evaluation and co-creation, and help deliver sustained transformation with meaningful, measurable outcomes for people and places.

We are delighted to introduce a publication that so well captures the energy and ideas that are embodied by our diverse network across urban UK. It challenges old ways of thinking about regeneration, and presents cogent arguments for putting culture at the heart of place-based development as we seek to build inclusive renewal and growth across the country.

We invite policymakers, funders, practitioners, and citizens alike to engage with the ideas within. As we look ahead to our upcoming conference in Salford this autumn – where we will focus on the connected topic of innovation districts and ecosystems – we hope this volume acts as a springboard for further collaboration and experimentation not only between cities and universities, but also with industry, government and other stakeholders. Because if we want to build resilient, inclusive places, we need to start by recognising the culture already within them—and build from there.

Cllr John Merry CBE
Chair of Key Cities and Deputy City Mayor of Salford

Professor Shirley Congdon
Chair of the Key Cities Innovation Network and Vice-Chancellor, University of Bradford

The 2024 Key Cities Innovation Network (KCIN) Conference, held at the University of Bradford, offered a compelling exploration of the transformative power of culture in shaping places, fostering identity, and driving economic and social development. Under the banner of "Culture, Place and Development," the day-long gathering brought together academics, civic leaders, policy-makers, and practitioners to share case studies, research, and strategies that foreground culture as central to sustainable regeneration.

Bradford at the Heart of Culture

The day opened with addresses from Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, Leader of Bradford City Council, and Councillor Jemima Laing, Deputy Leader of Plymouth City Council and Culture Portfolio Lead for Key Cities. Their remarks set a tone of urgency and optimism, positioning culture as an engine for inclusive urban growth.

Professor Shirley Congdon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bradford and Chair of the Conference, welcomed participants. She emphasised the university's commitment to social mobility and leadership in regeneration, particularly through the upcoming Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture programme, backed by a significant £5 million investment from the Arts Council.

Keynote Perspectives: Vision and Value

Darren Henley CBE, Chief Executive of Arts Council England, delivered the opening keynote, highlighting the role of cultural partnerships, the value of local knowledge, and the need for integrated funding strategies. He framed culture as an enabler of both economic resilience and civic wellbeing, particularly in underserved urban areas.

Dr Jaideep Gupte, Director of Research, Strategy and Innovation at the Arts & Humanities Research Council, offered an afternoon keynote. He emphasised the transformative potential of public investment in research, development, and innovation, calling for a place-based approach that links cultural capacity with inclusive economic growth.

Presentations: Research, Practice, and Community Voices

The conference featured eight presentations about innovation projects involving local partnership, all of which have been developed after the conference for inclusion in this compendium: seven as evidenced, peer-reviewed academic papers and one a civic partnership case study presented by Sunderland City Council.

A common thread is a growing consensus that while culture has long been a powerful driver of regeneration, sustainable culture-led growth must be rooted in local community and identity. In their presentation, the Rt Revd Dr Toby Howarth, Bishop of Bradford, and Professor Udy Archibong highlighted how community narratives and interfaith engagement shape inclusive

Bradford City Council Leader Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe addresses the conference. Below: BD2025 Creative Director Shanaz Gulzar partitipates in the discussion.
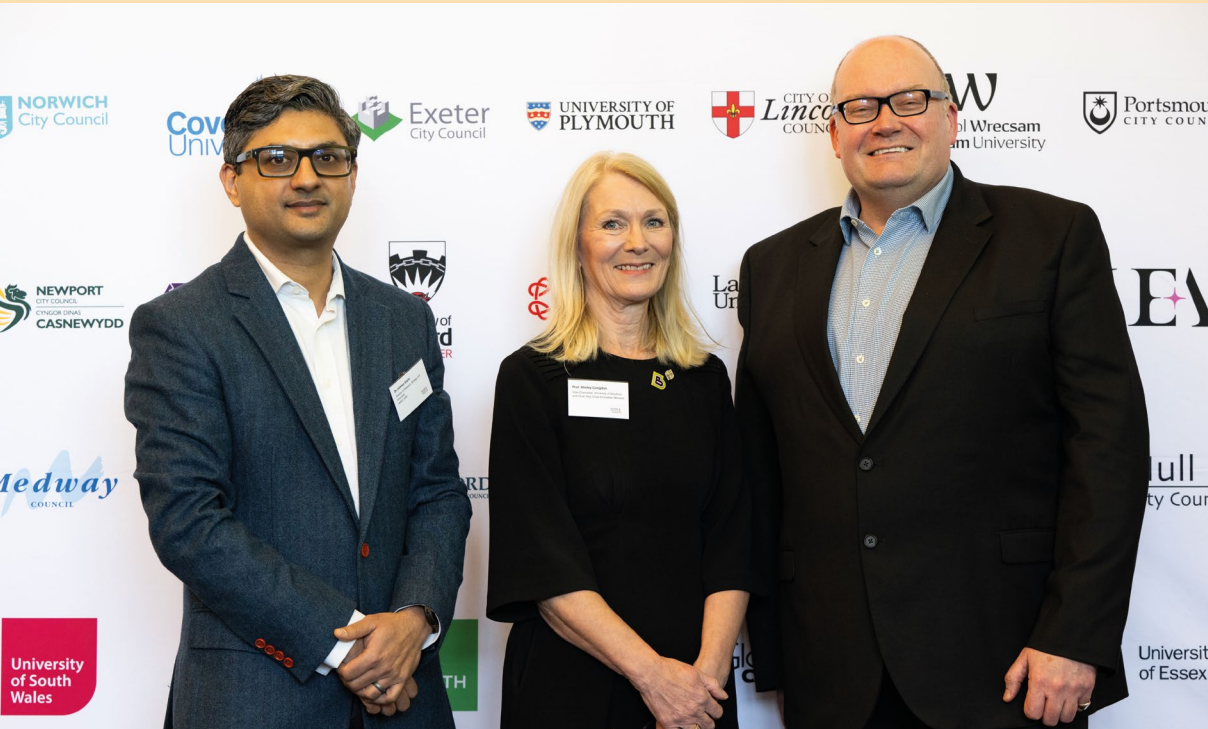
urban identities. Dr Tony Sampson's work at the University of Essex on "emotional geography" draws attention to perceptions of place, influenced by factors such as ageing, nostalgia, and emotion. He advocated for a mezzolevel of policy-making that sits between macro systems and hyperlocal projects.

Dr Ben Kyneswood of Coventry University explored the treasure chest of often hidden community archives to stimulate storytelling around local heritage. Understanding the experience that subcultures have of a place can be aided by a participatory mapping methodology described by Dr Lizzie Reed of the University of Southampton, noting how the process showed up the decline of spaces for lesbians and the importance of small-scale, in-person community interactions.

Stimulating innovation and creative industries in remote and disadvantaged areas was the challenge investigated by University of Plymouth Professors Chris Bennewith and Katharine Willis with a case study in the Great South West, while in the North West, a decade-long development of cultural and placemaking partnership in Salford was described by a team including Cllr Hannah Robinson-Smith of the City Council and from the University of Salford, Dr Emma Barnes, Lindsay Taylor and Sam Ingleson. Dr Daniel Keech of the Countryside and Community Research Institute and Professor Nicky Marsh of Southampton Institute of Arts and Humanities explored ways of making better use of underutilised buildings as key sites for cultural continuity through cross-sectoral regional partnerships.

For Sunderland City Council, Cllr Kevin Johnston highlighted the city's regeneration strategy, grounded in culture-led urban renewal and partnerships between the city and the university.

Discussion Themes: Emotion, Identity, and Inclusivity

A recurring theme throughout the day was the emotional resonance of place and its influence on community engagement. Presenters emphasised the importance of understanding how pride, nostalgia, and even negative emotions like loss or frustration shape community narratives. Participants discussed how storytelling, mapping, and participatory methods can surface these narrative and lead to more responsive policy.

Concern was highlighted about a decline in dedicated spaces for marginalised groups, not least the LGBTQ+ community, and the need for creating inclusive, affirming environments. Projects rooted in lived experience, such as collaborative mapping or community-led archives, highlighted a potential to surface subcultural knowledge and build social capital.

Role of Universities and Local Authorities

A key takeaway was the vital role of universities as anchors in cultural ecosystems.

Across the presentations, institutions were shown to act as conveners, research engines, and community connectors. From co-producing cultural metrics to training local artists, higher education played a pivotal part in bridging academic insight and civic engagement.

Local authorities were similarly cast as critical enablers, particularly when equipped with the tools and funding to embed culture in planning and regeneration. Several speakers stressed the efficacy of "cultural compacts" – cross-sector partnerships that integrate creativity into local policy frameworks which have long been advocated by Key Cities.

Toward a Positive Legacy

Shanaz Gulzar, Creative Director of Bradford UK City of Culture 2025, issued a compelling call to "amplify the positive." She encouraged participants to resist narratives of decline and instead foreground stories of care, creativity, and resilience. She emphasised the role of taxi drivers, faith leaders, and young people as cultural ambassadors whose contributions often go unrecognised.

Anna Dixon, the MP for Shipley and a member of the Key Cities APPG, echoed this optimism in her closing reflections, reaffirming the need for continued investment, cross-city collaboration, and an ethos of "relentless positivity."

THE REVIEW PANEL

The scholarly articles published in this compendium were peer-reviewed by a panel comprising:

Professor Shirley Congdon

The eighth and first female Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bradford, Shirley Congdon qualified as a nurse before deepening her academic expertise in health and social care. With extensive experience of senior positions in higher education, she is committed to values-led leadership to unlock potential for people of all backgrounds.

Professor Jane Falkingham CBE

Jane Falkingham is Professor of Demography & International Social Policy and Vice President (International & Global Engagement) at the University of Southampton, Director of the ESRC Centre for Population Change and a member of the ESRC Council.

Professor Paul Hollins

A specialist in music and cybernetics, Paul Hollins is Professor of Cultural Research Development at Bolton School of Arts and Creative Technologies at the University of Greater Manchester, where he is also the Senior Advisor for Knowledge Exchange and Research Excellence.

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

As I write this here in Plymouth, we have just celebrated welcoming the millionth visitor to the Box since it reopened in 2020. The city's museum, art gallery and archive opened its doors during the pandemic after a near £50 million refurbishment.

Our millionth visitor, Abi, and her two pre-school daughters crossed the threshold unaware that they would be at the centre of that milestone moment. A trip to the Box is now simply part of their usual routine – and that's why they signify, for me, the importance of access to culture for everyone in our city.

Everyone should feel able to pop into the Box, or their place's equivalent, on any given day. That belief in easy, unforced access to culture is one of my personal driving forces for being involved in politics.

In Plymouth, the team of staff and volunteers work incredibly hard to make the Box welcoming and accessible and a quick scan of Google reviews repeatedly underlines one aspect people really appreciate: it's free.

That's a deliberate decision and it is – pardon the pun – paying off. Because we're a Council that understands the importance of culture in placemaking, we continually renew our commitment to invest in it. There are big things on the horizon for our city and we need to make sure that our cultural offer is as strong as it can be. That's why successive budgets have protected it, putting it at the heart of the future growth and development of the city. Funding for culture is investment, not subsidy. It supports so many areas of work across the Council – including health and wellbeing,

The Box, Plymouth. Photo: Geni (CC-BY-SA 4.0)

education, tourism, placemaking and the creative industries. It raises the profile of the city, driving civic pride and, as the city seeks to encourage more people to move to Plymouth to take up roles linked to defence, it is culture that will provide interesting things to do, from theatre, music and dance to visual arts and heritage.

Our investment in culture continues to transform the image of the city, changing perceptions and raising the profile of Plymouth across the globe, as well as levering in significant additional funding. This is also an important policy area for our member cities, who recognise it as a key factor in creating strong and sustainable places with engaged communities.

Back in 2018-2019, Key Cities was one of the sponsors and a core participant in the Cultural Cities Enquiry, which recommended cross-sector, culture-led Cultural Compacts as a mechanism to drive growth in our cities. In 2023 we produced the *Culture and Place in Britain* Report in partnership with Arts Council England, highlighting the centrality of the relationships between local authorities, cultural organisations and wider stakeholders.

That report highlighted that inclusive access to culture plays an important part in the wellbeing of individuals and communities. It emphasised the significant role played by our universities in so many ways – in rejuvenating town centres, evaluating impacts, building civic partnerships, contributing new ideas. It also underlined the importance of creative industries in driving development at all levels, including micro-clusters outside the major metropolitan areas.

We find ourselves in a time of extreme financial pressure on individuals, on families, on public services and on local authorities – but also in a moment of hope that if we work together with determination, things can be better.

In that spirit the Key Cities conference in Bradford last November gathered university colleagues from the network who presented work on culture-related topics from emotional geographies to community archives and have now expanded that work into evidenced academic papers bringing all those things together: place partnerships, communities, creative industries, new ideas and hope for the future, which are all contained in these pages.

Cllr Jemima Laing
Deputy Leader of Plymouth City Council and Key Cities Portfolio Lead for Culture

New narratives for Bradford: people, place, faith and development

University of Bradford

New narratives for Bradford: people, place, faith and development

Udy Archibong, Toby Howarth, Andy Bowerman, Liam Sutton and Chris Gaffney

Bradford is a city with an ever-changing narrative. This narrative has often played down the strengths of the city's diverse communities with a consequential negative impact on cohesion and prosperity. In this paper we will show how key partners in Bradford are articulating a new narrative for the city by honouring stories that have made us who we are, while creating a foundation for the development of new stories. By re-framing the narratives that Bradford tells both about itself and that are told by others, we can build confidence for investment across a range of sectors.

The UK City of Culture 2025 designation has helped shape the focus of our work, as the year is a rare opportunity for Bradford to re-frame its narrative and thus support a culturally and economically stronger city. We explore three particular areas that illustrate Bradford's changing narrative, showing an increasing confidence across the district. These areas are football; interfaith and civic cohesion; and the value of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in

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Page 15: Building the 3D model of the University of Bradford Stadium. Photo: Visualising Heritage, University of Bradford

strengthening and deepening the engagement by minoritised groups with educational opportunities offered in the city.

Football

As with many cities that are part of the Key Cities Innovation Network (KCIN), local sports and particularly football are an important ingredient in Bradford's changing cultural narrative. The City's designation as UK City of Culture in 2025 coincides with the 40th anniversary of one of the most seminal moments in Bradford's modern history: the fire disaster at Bradford City FC's Valley Parade in which 56 people died and hundreds were injured, many with horrific burns.

The Bradford Fire is a good example of how a narrative can be told and re-told, honouring the experience of those present on that day, while opening up new perspectives. As Bradford City FC's official back-of-shirt and stadium sponsor, and with an academic focus over many years on football and community development and peace studies, the University of Bradford is well placed to help shape and articulate a new narrative around football for the city and district, with implications for other KCIN cities.

The story of the Bradford Fire is sharply and movingly told by local reporter Jim Greenhalf in his history of Bradford from 1974, It's a Mean Old Scene (Greenhalf, 2003). Greenhalf's chapter in that book, "Into the Valley of Death," quoting a foot-

ball chant still current at Bradford City at the time of the fire, tells of suffering and resilience, and situates the disaster within a wider narrative of terrible fires that have destroyed lives and livelihoods across the district.

Large crowds continue to attend an annual service commemorating the Bradford Fire, as new perspectives shape the framing of the fire in the city's history. One example is the story of the Plastic Surgery and Burns Research Unit (PSBRU) at the University of Bradford that was set up by Prof David Sharpe following the fire. The focus has been towards innovative approaches to wound healing, an example of which is the development of the "Bradford Sling" which is now used internationally in the treatment of burns. The Unit's development can be understood via a narrative of generosity, and entrepreneurial creativity coming out of suffering and death. The PSBRU continues to link public donations to medical research and Fellowships for the benefit of patients across the world.

Another perspective on the Bradford Fire story is told by the residents who live in the neighbourhood immediately surrounding the Valley Parade stadium. This is a community of largely Bangladeshi Muslim heritage. On match days, children from that community were often told not to go out for fear of racist abuse from visiting fans. Nevertheless, on the day of the Fire, in May 1985, families opened up their homes to survivors, offering vitally important blankets, drinks and tele-

phones. More recently, efforts have been made by both local residents' groups and the football club itself to build a more positive relationship between the community and the club. The award-winning "Bangla Bantams" supporters' group is one example, whose story was serialised for a BBC Radio 4 drama in 2023. The development of this supporters group echoes work done elsewhere in the country diversifying the English Football League's fanbase, countering racism in football, and encouraging football to be an engine for cohesion and solidarity (Brentford Community Sports Trust, 2024).

The University of Bradford has been a centre for research into the link between sport, especially football, and peace for nearly 50 years. The potential for football to contribute to conflict resolution has been demonstrated across the world (Woodhouse et al, 2023; Football for Peace Academy, 2025). Currently, the University is building a 'virtual twin' of the stadium, allowing new access to memories and stories told by the fans themselves, including memories of the Bradford Fire. While academics at the University of Bradford have a long-standing interest in recording iconic buildings in the City, including sporting venues, research into rapid scanning to document industrial heritage has proved a game-changing approach to situating buildings in communities (Moore et al, 2022). In partnership with City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council the University has developed 'Virtual

Bradford', one of the first open data LoD3 city-scale digital twins which has been extended into the City's UNESCO World Heritage Site of Saltaire and into the regeneration projects adjacent to the City Centre. This place-based research helps drive decision-making by the local authority. There are key uses in planning, air flow monitoring, health, tourism and the creative economy, to name a few (Gaffney et al, 2025). The approach at The University of Bradford Stadium is to extend the technical work around the tangible asset that is the stadium and insert the fans' (intangible) stories into the model. While some of the content will reflect the 1985 fire, there will also be a strong narrative around resilience, pride and sense of place. The work will be a blueprint for bringing together community-based reflection that can be amplified nationally across city-based cultural hotspots.

One particular facet of the University's research which helps to build a new narrative around football and community from Bradford, and which has potential for wider application across the KCIN network is "Football for the Goals." This is an initiative providing a platform for the global football community to engage with and advocate for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN has declared sport to have special relevance in relation to a number of the SDGs, and the English Football League (EFL) are in the early stages of mapping how projects conducted through the community trusts

of the 72 EFL clubs contribute to the 17 SDGs.

The EFL's initial scoping study shows that in the 2020-2021 season, member clubs collectively contributed more than £1m for community investment across four key SDGs: health and wellbeing (SDG3), quality education (SDG4), decent work and economic growth (SDG8) and sustainable cities and communities (SDG11). Prof Tom Woodhouse, of the University of Bradford, has been developing a Football for the SDGs Database. This dataset also includes the Index of Material Deprivation for every club. 17 of the 28 Key Cities in the KCIN network have professional clubs in the EFL and the Premier League. Prof Woodhouse believes that there is scope for a pilot project exploring whether and how football might connect some of the KCIN cities around a common agenda in pursuit of the UN SDGs. By expressly using these metrics, such a pilot would allow the clubs to understand not only their role in an international sense, but also to understand the effectiveness of the work that they do in their own local community.

Interfaith relations and civic cohesion

Immigration and the living together of people from different cultures and religious beliefs has been a central part of Bradford's narrative since the industrial revolution. Each of the individuals, families and communities that came to Bradford, from Ireland, Wales, Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic States, Italy, the Caribbean, the Indi-

an Subcontinent and especially Pakistan, among many other places, has brought its own stories. These are stories of resilience in the face of suffering, entrepreneurial creativity and sheer hard work in an environment often challenging and hostile but also rich with opportunity.

Although Bradford's immigrants helped to create the wealth of the city and district, both economically and culturally, descriptions of the city especially in the national media have often highlighted the negative sides of the debate around 'integration' and 'cohesion' (Goodhart, 2011; Pidd and Halliday, 2015). In the words of Prof Ted Cantle's Home Office report following the 2001 northern "disturbances," the narrative has been of Bradford as a place in which communities live "parallel lives" (Home Office, 2001). Incidents such as the burning of Salman Rushdie's Satantic Verses, Bradford-born teenagers travelling to Syria to join Islamic State in 2015, visits by far-right groups such as the English Defence League and Britain First, and George Galloway's by-election victory have only entrenched this narrative.

But there is another Bradford narrative, which has grown in strength particularly over the last ten years: the story of a city and district in which relationships have flourished across communities, leaders have learned from the difficult history and this learning is being offered to the country as a whole.

In 2018, Bradford District was chosen as

one of five pilot areas to be allocated central government funding following an Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper (HM Government, 2018). This choice acknowledged that Bradford had been one of the first cities to become a City of Sanctuary in 2008, that it has over 1500 voluntary organisations and that partnerships are strong between public, private and third sectors, especially across faith communities. The choice to include Bradford was made partly on the basis of an explicit recognition by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities of the desire shown by Bradford Council to take an evidence-based approach to the analysis of and engagement with local needs (Hayon and Vine, 2022. See particularly page 8). Even simply the recognition of Bradford Council's strong desire to be part of the pilot and its participation showed that the historically negative narrative was already being challenged.

The Metropolitan Council chose to call the resulting programme "Bradford for Everyone" and to place it under an independently chaired Stronger Communities Partnership Board. In all, 36,000 people in the District engaged directly with the Bradford for Everyone programme of 23 core and 60 smaller projects, with at least 122,000 more reached through campaigns and other activities. Bradford for Everyone as a whole, as well as many of its constituent projects, has been extensively evaluated by external researchers. The Belong cohesion and integration network undertook

the programme's final evaluation (Davies Hayon and Vine, 2022). Belong, with researchers from the University of Kent, were commissioned to evaluate Bradford as part of the wider evaluation of the five pilot areas as a whole (Lalot et al, 2022), and the University of Bradford undertook focused social integration research into Bradford's Stronger Communities Strategy (Archibong and Imoh, 2022).

These evaluations and others show that it is possible to measure indices of cohesion, and that the 2018 Government intervention, both at a national and local level, shifted the data, and thus the narrative, around cohesion and integration. Especially from the University of Kent/Belong research study, the data shows that Bradford, along with the other pilot areas has, since the establishment of the programme, exhibited a greater sense of social cohesion than other comparable contexts that were not part of the programme. This was, "manifested in higher levels of reported social activism, interpersonal trust and closer personal relationships, greater political trust and more positive attitudes towards immigrants" (Lalot et al, 2022, p. 536).

Recognition of Bradford's new cohesion narrative has not come only from academics and think-tanks. Dame Louise Casey, author of the 2016 review that led to the 2018 green paper, was invited by BBC Radio 4 to make a series ahead of the 2024 general election looking at some of the most deeply rooted challenges facing a new government. Her last episode, focussing on

cohesion, was based in Bradford, and reflected positively on the changes that she had seen since her review (BBC, 2024). It is noteworthy in terms of Bradford's changing cohesion narrative that the city largely escaped the summer disturbances of 2024. Recognition has also come in the form of Bradford's status as UK City of Culture 2025 which identifies the potential for creative industries across the whole of the district.

Bradford's experience demonstrates the value of investment in high-quality cohesion programmes in promoting a changed narrative of the city and district both within the area itself and as it is seen by those outside. This narrative is essential for investment and growth. In an increasingly polarised political and cultural landscape, nationally and internationally, Bradford's experience, with other areas that have made similar investments, may provide useful learning for other contexts within the KCIN network.

Within this cohesion narrative, faith has been an important thread. There has, for many years, been a strong commitment from Bradford's religious communities, to stand with each other at important moments either for the city as a whole or when one or other community has felt under threat. Yet this narrative has also needed to change. Dr Suzanne Vernon-Yorke, in her PhD thesis (Vernon-Yorke, 2023), challenges traditional, patriarchal modes of interfaith engagement, drawn from her experience as Chaplain at the Universi-

ty of Bradford. Other challenges can also be made in terms of the participation of young people, smaller religious communities, minoritised people such as those with LGBTQ+ identities and those not formally representing religious organisations.

Faith leaders in Bradford and community leaders from faith communities have needed to honour a strong legacy of interfaith commitment led by 'community elders' and formally designated faith leaders with a need to expand participation in and leadership of shared events and discussion

forums. The challenges to interfaith relations within Leeds and Bradford, as well as nationally, since the marked escalation of conflict in the Middle East after 7 October 2023 have needed the creativity and resilience of informal relationships across faiths as formal frameworks of meetings and events have not proved sustainable.

Nevertheless, during the COVID pandemic it was faith communities in Bradford and Leeds that demonstrated a reach and resilience in supporting those in need (Wellprings Together, 2020). The experi-

Sacred Music at the interfaith event during the 2024 Bradford Literature Festival. Photo: Bradford Cathedral.

ence of particularly young religious people in Bradford has also been documented in two short films entitled, "Young in Covid" (Kidmat, 2023).

The documentation and dissemination of honest, positive stories from and about faith communities engaging in social action and working well together has been an important element in shifting Bradford's cohesion narrative. Against a wider narrative that posits religions as competitors and enemies, for example in Samuel P Huntingdon's Clash of Civilizations thesis (Huntingdon, 1993), Bradford has developed a strong, local narrative of faith communities standing with and for one another. When the last remaining synagogue in Bradford, situated in what had become a strongly Muslim neighbourhood, needed urgent repairs, it was local Muslims who worked with the synagogue chair, to save the building (Pidd, 2013)

Conversations and joint working across religious divides are important in changing the city's narrative in order to facilitate investment and growth. These conversations have also been important in directly addressing economic issues. One example of such a conversation has been taking place about Yorkshire's lamb and mutton market. Research by the UK's Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board shows that while Muslims in the UK make up about 6.5% of the UK population, they buy 30% lamb by volume (AHDB, 2024). In 2023 the market for halal meat in the UK was estimated to be £823m (ibid). This data points to an important and beneficial economic relationship between Bradford's Muslims and the sheep farmers who work the surrounding rural areas of Yorkshire.

In 2024, the chaplaincy of the Great Yorkshire Show in Harrogate in 2024 hosted a conversation between church leaders, rural sheep farmers and a prominent leader in the urban, Muslim community who buy much of the lamb and mutton that these farmers produce. What emerged from this conversation were stories of money being made in difficult circumstances and friendships formed over many years, but also deep distrust, hurt and even outright racism. These discussions addressed specific, technical concerns around halal meat, stunning and ritual slaughter. They also highlighted the appetite among younger, wealthier Muslims whose religious faith is driving an emerging market for not just halal meat, but what is called tayyib – meaning something that is not just permissible (the meaning of halal) but also pure, clean and wholesome (Mokti et al, 2024).

Bradford's story shows that halal / tayiba marked meat can be accommodated positively in the lamb trade and embraced by non-Muslim farmers. But it also shows how important narrative is in this trade. An unfavourable story held by one or other party in an economic relationship can negatively impact the trade between them, while efforts to build bridges and to share stories have the potential to bring not only social cohesion but also significant economic benefits. A city's narrative cannot be told in isolation from its wider context, and the re-framing of narratives by different communities can bring economic benefit including trade and tourism, as well as a wider sense of cohesion and mutual flourishing across and between rural and urban communities. At the core of a successful partnership is the understanding of the symbiotic relationships that emphasise place and people, and the facilitation of discussions that lead to mutual benefit.

Each partner in the Key Cities Network is different, facing different challenges, but Bradford's story, especially as part of a wider national integration pilot, shows that learning in social cohesion can be measured and shared, and that negative narratives can be shifted, even when deeply entrenched both locally and in a wider perspective.

Employment and Further Academic Study

Central to Bradford's work in cohesion and integration over the last decade has been a recognition that many of the problems associated with a lack of social cohesion are rooted in poverty. For Bradford's narrative to continue to change positively, individual and family narratives of work, economic success and academic attainment also need to be re-framed, especially for young people with backgrounds of traditionally low expectations in these areas.

Two particular ways in which Bradford Metropolitan District Council and the University of Bradford have attempted to address opportunities for young people are Brad-ATTAIN (Bradford Pathways to Academia for Minoritised Ethnicities) and the "Inclusive Employers Toolkit" which was developed by the Bradford for Everyone programme (referenced above) in partnership with Grant Thornton and launched in 2020.

Brad-ATTAIN is a £1.6m project based in the University of Bradford which brings together partners from across the region through positive action to enhance research engagement amongst Black, Asian, and ethnic (BAME) minoritised cohorts. The project was initiated to address persistent and systemic inequalities experienced by people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds in Higher Education. These inequities are particularly evident in the sector-wide lack of BAME progression to Post Graduate Research (PGR) study (comprising Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Master of philosophy (MPhil), Master of research (MRes), and professional doctoral) and their underrepresentation in academic leadership and professorial roles. This disparity persists despite the increasing diversity of the UK's student population (Badrie, MacDonnell and Patel, 2023; Arday, 2020; Arday and Mirza, 2018; Clay, 2018; Bhopal, 2016). In 2014/15, Higher Education institutions enrolled 14,190 full time UK domiciled PGR students in their first year, of whom only 3% were Black and 8% were Asian. In 2019/2020, this figure has risen slightly to 14,225,

but representation remained unchanged, with only 4% Black and 8% Asian students (Advance HE, 2022; HESA, 2021). These metrics strongly indicate that the PGR landscape for minoritised ethnic groups has seen little progress despite growing awareness and an increased drive to address underrepresentation.

The development of Brad-ATTAIN in 2022, was informed by the University of Bradford's vision of a world of inclusion and equality of opportunity, where diversity is a source of strength, is valued, supported and leveraged. Delivered through four workstreams, Brad-ATTAIN seeks to increase the access and participation of BAME students in Post Graduate Research (PGR) study to make our diversity count and deliver impact through increased representation in academic and research pipelines both internally and externally to the University across the region. It aims to:

○ Create new and improve existing pathways to support progression to PGR study for people from underrepresented Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups;

○ Take positive action to build a vibrant inclusive community of BAME researchers as leaders and influencers through improved pathways to academic and research careers;

○ Take a decolonising approach to address evidenced issues of inequality and barriers to progression through and beyond the PGR student lifecycle for students from BAME groups;

○ Fundamentally transform organisational culture informed by understanding of the lived experiences of BAME staff and students as well as their peers through addressing structural and cultural barriers to their progression;

○ Increase cultural competence across our partnership to decolonise research and deliver inclusive employment, recruitment practices and workplace cultures.

These aims inform our evaluation strategy and are delivered through activities which provide positive, practical experiences and outcomes for students. These focused activities include, but are not limited to, the following:

○ Delivery of positive action research internships within the university and our partners to immerse current and future BAME PGR students in the research environment and enable them to better understand and engage with the research process to encourage and facilitate progression.

○ Internships made available to BAME undergraduates in their penultimate or final year; PGT students; alumni; suitably qualified staff from partner organisations.

○ Provision of targeted support for transition into research study for BAME students who have successfully secured a PGR place, ensuring that students are matched with a BAME Personal Academic Mentor and have access to funding.

○ In collaboration with project partners, we have developed a positive action sponsorship programme to provide specific funding to support BAME PGR students through their research studies in collaboration with established research centres across the University.

○ Increased visibility of BAME academic staff as influencers and active brokers of the development of a diverse research and academic pipeline.

○ Development of inclusive workplace cultures through supporting employers (including the University) who provide placements and/ or sponsor BAME students in developing their EDI practice, for example in recruitment and selection, career progression, and development of ethical research practice.

Although Brad-ATTAIN is a recent development, it is changing the opportunities for BAME students by raising awareness in, and expectations of, employers, by supporting businesses to develop diversity in the workplace and by providing an enhanced pipeline of more diverse graduates. The preliminary evaluations of the Internship, Research Placement and Networking Bootcamp elements of the programme are hugely supportive of the change that has opened up for the participants. Reflections from hundreds of participants include 'I got a true practical experience in talking about my project to others from widely different backgrounds...the connections with other researchers were invaluable...it has made clear that I need to reflect more on why I am doing my PhD...I can improve my own confidence in my ability to work on new projects...I see the long term goal as interesting...I believe it increases my skills exponentially'. Alongside this step change is a strong underpinning by the University to leverage entrepreneurial activity, via the new Bradford Renduchintala Enterprise Ecosystem (BREE). BREE is fully committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion and supports academics from all Faculties and at any career stage, as well as students. Much of the entrepreneurial activity benefits the city as well as the members of our institution.

The "Inclusive Employers Toolkit" was developed in a collaboration between the Bradford for Everyone programme and Grant Thornton with three organisations in the district (the University of Bradford, Bradford Council and the Yorkshire Building Society) who were committed to getting better at recruiting, retaining and developing a diverse workforce (Go Higher West Yorkshire, 2020). The work in producing the toolkit was evaluated by Aspire-igen, showing a marked improvement in the confidence of participants in identifying issues relating to diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Tokos et al, 2022). The

toolkit offers therefore a tried, tested and accessible way for Bradford employers to learn from recognised employers in their own city context. The continued impact of this initiative is now being driven by SkillsHouse, the city's central hub for education, training and skills development.

Under the leadership of Bradford Council's Employment and Skills department and in collaboration with its valued partners, SkillsHouse (https://skillshouse.co.uk/) aims to equip individuals across the age range with the tools, confidence, and opportunities to achieve their aspirations. Via this route it is anticipated that there will be a measurable increase in opportunities for better skilled work. The development of a strong talent pipeline for Bradford via skills, knowledge, and attributes needed to build a thriving workforce is complex. This is particularly true when the aim is also to provide strategies that will support careers in the longer term. The areas where SkillsHouse are shaping the future of Bradfordians with elements of the Inclusive Employers Toolkit embedded include:

Empowering Employers – Supporting employers to actively invest in the growth and development of their current and future workforce.

Bridging Education and Employment – Strengthening collaboration between employers and the education system to open pathways to rewarding employment. Focused efforts ensure our most vulnerable residents gain access to meaningful job op-

portunities and placements.

Upskilling for the Future – Delivering targeted training and reskilling programs that address critical skill shortages across industries.

A Unified Support System – Offering a seamless, joined-up service from multiple agencies, ensuring employers across Bradford have access to coordinated and accessible support.

The importance of new narratives around education and employment opportunities in the Bradford district are central to changing the direction of the city. While the University has been top of the English Social Mobility Index for four years in a row, the ambition for our students and fellow citizens in the city has provided a good base for clear collaboration with numerous stakeholders. The practical outcomes of the collaborations are substantive and of value beyond the city.

Conclusion

The idea of intentionally framing or re-framing the cultural narrative of a city or district is not an easy one to articulate or measure in an academic research publication, particularly when it is evident that change is currently occurring. Nevertheless, along with the case studies above, there is a clear intention in some of the Bradford UK City of Culture 2025 events and publicity to do precisely this. The opening event for the year was entitled, "RISE". The BBC News report on that

event included a quote from a woman in the crowd who said, "It made me proud to be from Bradford, for once" (BBC, 2025). The press release from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in December 2024 on Bradford's City of Culture year included an estimation that, "the increased cultural and economic activity as a result of being UK City of Culture 2025 could leverage and accelerate an extra £700 million of growth for the Bradford district by 2030, whilst helping to get more people involved in cultural events across the city." These quotes bring together the two desired outcomes that have been evident in the examples used in this chapter. Narrative re-framing is about people thinking differently about a particular place, either from within that place or from outside; it is also about the economic development which follows.

The authors of this chapter hope to widen and deepen its scope by identifying other areas besides the three that we have focused on here which show how Bradford's narrative is being re-framed. We plan to bring partners together around these and the further topics identified, hosted by the University of Bradford, to produce a wider study, focused only on Bradford and held within the City of Culture year.

There is further potential, coming out of Bradford's year as UK City of Culture, for academic research looking at the effect of Bradford 2025 on the city and district in terms of economic development. This work has been done for previous cities of culture,

and the University of Bradford is committed to understanding and amplifying the legacy of a year of intense cultural activity in 2025. The authors are all members of 'anchor' institutions in the city and it is important to reflect not only how the city changes because of City of Culture, but also how our institutions change.

This year's KCIN publication on the topic of Culture, Place and Development, includes chapters showing how other cities such as Salford and Sunderland have been transformed by an intentional process of investing not only in physical infrastructure but also in a place's narrative. In the day conference leading to this publication, there was much talk on the idea of 'emotional geography' that was introduced in the University of Essex presentation. Our contribution from Bradford fits into this wider subject matter, and aims to show that the re-framing of the city and district's narrative, which has found a specific focus in Bradford 2025, has been going on in a range of different ways, from social cohesion to football to skills training for employers, and for several years at least. There is one specific initiative referenced in this chapter that has particular potential for sharing across the KCIN network. This is the idea of connecting at least some of the cities around the agenda of football and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The value of determining change using metrics that are commonly understood gives rise to understanding change at the local level, but to

also reflect on the wider implications for our community.

Each of the three examples that we have highlighted here have been worked out in local partnerships. Often these partnerships have included the Metropolitan District Council and the University of Bradford working with other local partners. These examples demonstrate that the partnership between a district council, a local university and other groups, whether business or faith based, is well suited to initiatives which bring academic rigour and economic focus to the wider cultural development of a geographical place. This is, of course, at the heart of the rationale for the KCIN.

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Leveraging Emotional Geographies of Heritage to Boost Community Empowerment

University of Essex

Leveraging Emotional Geographies of Heritage to Boost Community Empowerment at the Mezzolevel

Tony Sampson

Introduction

This paper calls for a recalibration of community development strategies, integrating emotional geography and intermediary (mezzolevel) organisational structures to address regional inequalities. It argues for policies that reflect the intrinsic and diverse values of place-based emotional experiences, advocating community empowerment and sustainable development. This approach offers a policy pathway that retains and enhances the most valuable aspects of the previous Levelling Up agenda while addressing its significant shortcomings. It also notes an important alignment between CERG's community development strategies and the policy proposals adopted by the current government's English Devolution White Paper.

Local authorities play a critical role in community development, yet they face considerable challenges in bridging the gap between national policies and hyperlocal community needs. For the most part, national government policy and funding mechanisms have constrained local authorities to competitive bidding processes and limited resources. Furthermore, while engagements with voluntary and private sector partners help to mitigate issues to some extent, due to a range of barriers,

local government can sometimes lack a nuanced understanding of localised issues and community sentiments. Given current proposals to merge authorities into larger structures, newly devolved governance will need new strategies to connect with local communities.

To develop scalable solutions to these challenges, this paper draws on three main aspects of the Cultural Engine Research Group's (CERG) community development work. Firstly, it expands on the research group's previous critical analysis of the limitations of pride-in-place discourses deployed in national and local government policy. In contrast to the previous government's narrow focus on pride as an emotive metric of Levelling Up success or failure, CERG argue for the utility of a broader study of a community's emotional geography. Secondly, the discussion looks at lessons learnt from publicly funded project engagement including a series of pilot research workshops exploring emotional community engagements with heritage on the North Essex coast. Lastly, the paper reflects on over 10 years of non-academic practical experience of working in and with local authority structures to engage with communities in Essex and East London through heritage, arts, and cultural programmes.

The paper is structured around two proposed strategies. The first builds on existing academic literature to describe emotional geography concepts and methods. The objective has been to learn from

this literature and CERG's pilot studies to develop a research toolkit that leverages local engagement with heritage and culture to boost community development and empowerment. However, the success of this approach is contingent on structural issues of local governance. The second strategy therefore considers the advantages of what CERG have termed an enhanced mezzolevel. In short, in response to current national government proposals for fewer and larger local authorities, the mezzolevel bridges a growing gap between macrolevel policy mechanisms and the microlevel needs of local communities.

Hidden Heritage

In contrast to previous government interest in metrics of pride, CERG's approach to community development and heritage recognises that many so-called "left behind" places do not lack a sense of emotional pride-in-place. Through various funded projects in the Essex region, our group have observed instead a distinct deficit in the resources and venues through which pride (and a wide range of other emotions relating to place) can be expressed. For example, in a Cultural Engine report on the Clacton constituency in Essex for the Resorting to the Coast project (Tofield, 2016), it was established that given the relative size of the population, the area is dramatically underrepresented in terms of its heritage and cultural offer. Through extensive community engagement in Essex, CERG have found that alternative seaside

cultures - such as music scenes, fanzine cultures, cultural relations to food, fishing industries, and histories of rural and diasporic life - are often marginalised (Sampson and Branch, 2024). These rich cultural dimensions can be overlooked when the economic value of tourism assets, such as piers and arcades, is the focus of attention. This imbalance highlights the need to assimilate diverse cultural narratives into broader discussions of regional identity and development.

Images of Tendring coastal region courtesy of Simon Poulter

By way of illustration, when working with Essex County Council on the Resorting to the Coast project between 2018-19, CERG brought community groups together to discuss neglected coastal heritage assets in the Tendring area. This project uncovered a rich seam of hidden heritage and a vibrant, yet mostly underexposed, social history. It revealed emotional community ties to East London, neglected oral histories along Jaywick Sands, and alternative places of architectural note. More recent CERG research projects in Tendring and Rochford continue to explore ways to de-

velop community heritage engagement through participatory workshops mapping relationships to place, through stories and events people are emotionally connected to.

Fig. 1. Emotional Geography, Culture and Community – Sampson, 20 January 2025.
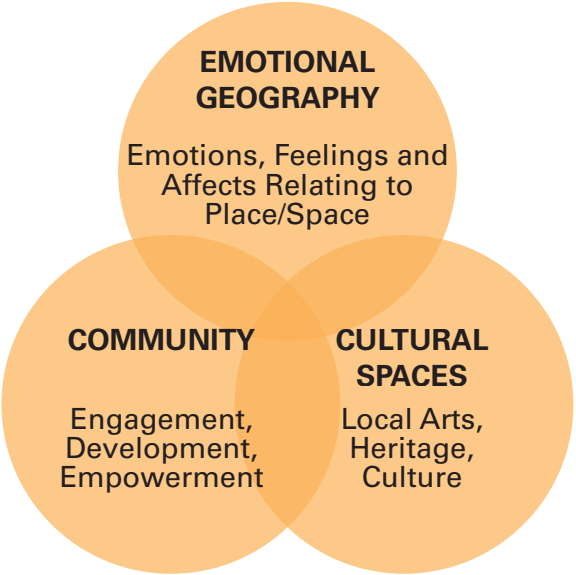
Beyond Levelling Up and the Limitations of Pride-in-Place

Previous government Levelling Up policy proposed using pride-in-place as a quantitative measure of community satisfaction and engagement. Despite the demise of Levelling Up as a policy marker, pride-in-place has intriguingly resonated with a range of stakeholders, including local government and strategic funders. For example, the North Essex Economic Board (NEEB) were developing a "Pride in Place Evidence Base" aimed at enhancing "pros-

perous and inclusive communities... and furthering economic growth" (Chelmsford City Council, 2023). However, as a concept for community development, the assumed agency of pride-in-place as a measure of value is often ambiguously defined, and its potential for implementation as a policy success metric therefore remains inadequately framed.

In the previous government's Levelling Up White Paper (2022), pride-in-place was disappointingly positioned within a deficit model. So-called "left-behind places" were crudely contrasted with "steaming ahead" places. According to this framework, the former supposedly suffered from "a loss or erosion of their identity, traditions, and local pride as a result of long-term decline in their economic prospects" (Shaw et al., 2022: 5). In essence, Levelling Up was a policy rooted in a prevalent neoliberal logic that reduced emotions like pride-in-place to simplistic co-determinants of economic success or failure. Yet, there is little evidence suggesting that economically deprived places necessarily suffer from a deficit in pride – or any other emotion – compared to more affluent areas (ibid., 2022).

Rather than framing economically deprived places in terms of emotional deficit and decline, CERG research explores how local place-based emotions can be more effectively leveraged for community development and empowerment. Moving away from quantitative measures, our approach focuses on the granular, qualitative level

of community sentiment, aligning with an emotional geography toolkit. For instance, CERG's pilot study of North Essex coastal towns revealed that many place-based emotions are often immeasurable and invisible. "Sources of pride," particularly in seaside economies, are frequently "unrepresented and undervalued" (Sampson and Branch, 2024). As a result, "left-behind places" are not necessarily lacking in pride but often struggle to find platforms to showcase it (ibid.).

By working collaboratively with local communities to co-produce heritage and cultural sites, emotional geographers gain valuable insights into the nuanced feelings people experience and share about the places they live. This approach creates opportunities for community assets - such as museums, cultural centres, and tourist attractions - to be developed with and within communities, ultimately cultivating emotions (including pride) in addition to enhancing and enabling local development.

Theoretical Foundations of Emotional Geography

Following a review of pertinent academic literature in the field, it is useful to highlight six key theoretical perspectives underpinning CERG's emotional geography approach.

1. The Centrality of Emotions in Geography

The integration of emotion in geographical research challenges a conventional schol-

arly separation between cognitive rationality and emotions. Scholars such as Anderson and Smith (2001), Davidson and Milligan (2004), and Pile (2010) emphasise the need to incorporate emotions into geographical inquiry, as they are central to human experiences of space and place. Anderson and Smith (2001) similarly advocate for an approach that enriches understanding of spatial dynamics by including emotions. Emotional geography research therefore posits that emotions are not isolated phenomena but deeply connected to spatial dynamics related to cultural community practices. For instance, Wright (2012) and Kearney (2009) examine how emotions like hope, joy, despair, and belonging shape experiences in development contexts or heritage engagements. Smith et al. (2009) and Kearney (2009) focus on the relational nature of spatial experiences, highlighting how emotions both influence and are influenced by specific places, such as heritage sites, homelands, and personal geographies.

2. Multidisciplinarity and Conceptual Complexity

Emotional geography advantageously draws on multidisciplinary resources, as seen in studies like Emotion, Place, and Culture (Smith et al., 2009) and Heritage, Affect, and Emotion (Tolia-Kelly et al., 2017), which blend together e.g., psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, and feminist geography. There is further potential to expand this study through, for example, social epidemiology and commu-

nications (Cummins et al., 2007). However, these multidisciplinarity gains need to be seen against a backdrop of complexity, since emotion and affect theory navigate a challenging conceptual terrain. There is a need to carefully unpack the intricacies before developing methodological tools. As follows, Davidson and Milligan (2004), Kearney (2009), and Tolia-Kelly et al. (2017) stress that emotions are embodied and experienced through sensory engagement with spaces. This research stresses the material and affective dimensions of human-environment interactions, revealing how emotions shape perceptions and social relations. Anderson (2009) and Pile (2010) further distinguish between emotions (expressed, cognitive) and affect (non-cognitive, pre-reflective), pointing to the nuances between representational and non-representational aspects of emotional experiences.

These concepts also offer a dual perspective on the interactions between emotion, feeling and affect. Firstly, emotional geography investigates how the spatial-temporal environments people inhabit evoke, shape, or suppress their experiences. Secondly, these affective relationships with time and space, in turn, influence how experiences are understood, used, and transformed. The research therefore contributes to a critical understanding of the dynamics of power, inclusion, and marginalisation.

3. Methodological Innovations and Practical Applications

Notwithstanding these conceptual complexities, emotional geography introduces novel methodological innovations with real-world applications. Anderson (2009) and Wood and Smith (2004) propose new methods to study emotions and affect, such as multi-sensory approaches, ethnography, and non-representational frameworks. Furthermore, the contrast between Pile (2010) and Anderson's (2009) approach suggests that the combination of representational (emotions) and non-representational (affects) frameworks could potentially offer researchers expanded tools and perspectives. These methodological developments have practical implications, such as influencing heritage practices (Kearney, 2009; Tolia-Kelly et al., 2017), enhancing place-based well-being (Wood and Smith, 2004), and rethinking community development (Wright, 2012).

4. Political and Social Dimensions of Emotions and Affect

Wright (2012) and Pile (2010) explore how emotions and affects are manipulated in political and social contexts. As follows, the embodied nature of emotions and the non-representational concept of affect can be mapped across a spectrum from personal feelings to communal and political affects. By understanding the emotional and affective dimensions of place, emotional geography contributes to shaping policies and development practices that align with

the lived experiences of individuals and communities.

5. Emotion, Culture, and Heritage

The academic literature brings to light the role emotional geography can play in building community engagement around heritage and culture. The anthology Emotion, Place, and Culture (Smith et al., 2009) explores how emotions are deeply interwoven with cultural and spatial experiences, influencing human interactions with environments and cultural landscapes. Similarly, Kearney (2009) explores how indigenous communities maintain deep emotional and sensory connections to their ancestral lands. These ties are critical to identity and heritage, accentuating the centrality of emotional geographies in understanding the relationship between people and their homelands.

Tolia-Kelly, Waterton, and Watson (2017) emphasise that heritage is more than material objects; it is experienced through emotions and bodily engagements with place. This perspective moves beyond textual analyses to focus on the sensory and atmospheric dimensions of heritage sites.

6. Harnessing Emotions for Community Engagement and Development

Wright (2012) illustrates how emotions like hope and despair influence development processes. Recognising these emotional dimensions can lead to more inclusive, postcolonial approaches to community building. Wood and Smith (2004)

similarly discuss how communal activities like music-making can promote emotional well-being, enhance quality of life, and empower communities.

Emotional geography provides a powerful framework for understanding the relationships between people, spaces, and cultures. By acknowledging and leveraging these emotional dimensions, communities can deepen their engagement with heritage and culture, encouraging development that is inclusive, caring, and rooted in shared emotional experiences.

CERG's approach develops on Pile's (2010) conceptual framework. This acknowledges three layers of emotional geography: 1. affects (non-cognitive), 2. feelings (pre-cognitive), and 3. emotions (cognitive). Similar to other methods applied in MacKian's mapping of emotional experiences and Jupp's ethnographic research on community dynamics in deprived neighbourhoods (ibid., 2010), these layers recognise the complexities of emotional geography. These intricacies include dynamics of belonging, exclusion, and community tensions, which contrast with the simplified pride-in-place deficit model.

Building on Emotional Geography Literature

This review of academic literature reveals a series of significant themes that point to the potential utility of emotional geography in supporting a practical understanding of the interplay between place, hu-

man emotional, and affective experiences. These developments can be summarised under the following seven headings:

1. Understanding Emotional Geography in the Community Context

Emotional geography is a developing field of research that studies how emotions shape experiences of places and spaces. Conventionally, emotions and rational thinking have been considered as separate in many areas of academic research. However, it is now widely recognised that feelings like joy, hope, fear, and belonging deeply influence how people interact with their environment. This perspective helps us understand that emotions are not simply personal—they are relationally tied to cultural practices and shared community spaces.

2. Moving Beyond Pride-in-Place

While Levelling Up policy recognised the importance of these emotional connections with place, it focused too heavily on pride as a sole indicator of community connection with local culture, arts, and heritage. Emotional geography encourages a much broader and inclusive view of complex feelings associated with the places people live in. For example, although people living in more disadvantaged areas may often feel frustrated, angry, or uninvested in local heritage projects, they may also share a sense of hope and pride with others in their community regarding a local landmark, event or space. CERG contend

that by drawing on research into complex emotions relating to hidden heritage, policymakers can more inclusively and effectively respond to community needs.

3. Interdisciplinary Approach

Emotional geography can combine insights from a range of disciplines, including geography, psychology, anthropology, social epidemiology, and cultural studies to understand how people emotionally connect to place. This interdisciplinary approach helps us understand how feelings are shaped by sensory experiences - what people see, hear, and feel in certain spaces and in relation to others. It also highlights the difference between (a), emotions expressed (like happiness or anger), and (b), feelings triggered by affective experiences (like comfort or unease).

4. Emotions, Culture, and Identity

Emotional geography research shows how a community's relation to cultural heritage exceeds local interest in physical landmarks. For indigenous communities, for example, the emotional connection and sensory ties people have to their history, environment and ancestral lands becomes central to their identity. It is these deep emotional bonds that inspire communities to come together and protect cross-generational cultural practices and ensure that development respects these connections.

5. Practical Tools for Community Engagement

In order to understand how emotions influence and improve community life, researchers need to reflexively co-create methods with key stakeholders to maintain the latter's agency. CERG's pilot studies have already included embedding multisensory studies designed to explore how images, sounds, smells, and textures in a place affect how people feel. These studies help us to further develop creative storytelling methods that reveal how people experience local spaces. By incorporating these methods into community activities, related to local heritage in particular, CERG have been able to observe, record and reflect on the experiences of people building emotional connections with place.

6. Shaping Inclusive Policies and Development

Understanding the emotional side of how people interact with places can lead to more inclusive and effective policies. For example, recognising feelings of exclusion or belonging can inform how public spaces can be co-designed, how heritage sites can be co-curated, and how community programmes can become more inclusive. Knowledge gained from emotional geography research can further guide postcolonial and culturally sensitive approaches that support diverse communities.

7. Building Robust, More Caring Communities

By understanding a full range of emotions people have toward their surroundings, researchers and policymakers can create programmes that not only inspire pride and belonging but also address feelings of loss, exclusion, or undervalued and unrecognised feelings a community has with place. This can lead to stronger, more connected, and more caring communities where more people feel engaged and supported.

Pilot Study: Participatory and Co-Creative Methods

CERG's methodology is designed to (a) understand how feelings about space and place shape emotional expressions, and (b), harness the potency of felt community experiences, enabling people to shape the places they live in.

Informed by previous project insights, pilot studies in North Essex seaside towns (See Sampson and Branch, 2024 & Sampson, Tofield and Branch, 2024) were designed to integrate participatory emotional geography research directly into a National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) project. The intention was to explore how a set of methodological tools could not only help us understand feelings about space and place, in relation to heritage, but also leverage local emotional geographies to empower communities to co-create deeper engagements and development opportunities.

Following ethical approval, CERG adopt-

ed two main approaches to enable our research. The first adhered to a general application of Community-Driven Research. It sought to engage participants as co-researchers to ground emotional insights in local contexts. Secondly, research was carried out using Creative Workshops intended to engender collective storytelling to express and document emotional connections with places.

The participatory creative workshops included a thematic mapping of individual and shared community stories about place. Discussions were initially stimulated by interactions with a sample historical archive supplied by a local heritage trust. Instead of relying solely on cognitive expressions of narrative, the participants were encouraged to tap into their own sensory and embodied experiences of place by deliberating how senses like sight, smell, taste, sound, and touch contribute to experiences of space. These initial efforts to tap into emotional geography revealed a rich series of narratives (recorded by researchers and participant memory books), including themes of social and cultural journeys from overcrowded cities to "seaside freedom". Participants also revealed distinct emotive community tensions around social class based on belonging/unbelonging. They referred back to local rural economies, and fishing communities, predating the dominance of the seaside economy, as well as noting the decline of these economies from the 1970s to date. In addition to expressing a passionate connection

with the environmental heritage of coastal towns (natural landmarks etc), participants were expressive about the demise of entertainment venues and changing retail experiences.

Future Emotional Geography Methodology and Toolkit

These initial workshops succeeded insofar as they gathered detailed accounts of emotional relations to place partially initiated by sensory triggers – smell, taste, touch in addition to sound and visual stimuli. They also inspired interest in how emotive themes could rouse further interest in a shared community space where interactions with local heritage could be co-curated within the community.

Community co-creation for Museum of Rochford. Photo: Tony Sampson

CERG's current development of emotional geography co-creation workshops for the Museum for Rochford project (Cultural Engine, 2024) builds on these successes in terms of encouraging rich discussions on sensory-driven emotional connections to place. Participants will be asked to share

how sensory experience shapes their relationship to local environment. Workshops will not only encourage valuable shared insights into hidden heritage assets but also encourage community engagement in co-curating heritage experiences. This approach builds on the potential to develop emotional themes that strengthen communal bonds with shared spaces. For instance, by exploring emotional landmarks - places tied to historical rituals or collective memories – the aim is to help communities reinforce shared identities and strengthen emotional ties to their local environments.

Further development of novel workshop activities remains essential for capturing the rich, subjective nature of emotional geography. Participatory emotional mapping enables community members to visually express their emotional relationships with places. Like a form of sensory autoethnography, it can also focus attention on how smell, sound, and touch contribute to spatial experiences and expand on our shared understanding of embodied emotional experiences.

However, following previous workshops, CERG recognise several challenges that need to be addressed. One significant issue is participant diversity. Despite efforts to make the workshops inclusive and accessible, the demographic reach was limited. To better reflect the wider emotional experiences of a community, future activities must be integrated into more diverse and high-footfall community settings. CERG are currently working with other stake-

holders (e.g., parish council, voluntary sector) to invite a broader participation and ensure that our emotional mapping captures a fuller spectrum of perspectives.

Theoretical and methodological complexities also pose challenges. Emotional geography intricately weaves together emotions (explicit consciously, expressed emotions alongside more implicit, non-conscious responses) with spatial experience. This dual focus complicates how researchers can effectively capture and represent emotional experiences that are sometimes deeply personal, culturally influenced, and/or politically charged. Addressing this complexity requires reflexive methods that can reveal pre-reflective and non-verbal emotional responses while being sensitive to the cultural and social contexts in which these emotions arise. Conducting future emotional geography research requires careful ethical considerations. Emotional data is deeply personal and can intersect with complex issues of identity.

Looking ahead, CERG's emotional geography approach must expand its scope through cross-cultural studies that explore how different social groups emotionally relate to space. Moreover, long-term research could uncover how emotional connections evolve as communities and environments change over time. Addressing power dynamics and inequalities by making sense of the interplay between class, gender and race perspectives, for example, will be crucial for understanding how socio-economic and cultural factors shape emotional expe-

riences of space.

Ultimately, insights gained from CERG's co-creation workshops and future research have the potential to directly inform policies and public space design, cultivating more inclusive, emotionally responsive, and caring community development.

A Case for a Mezzolevel Organisation: Bridging Local Communities and Larger Governance Structures
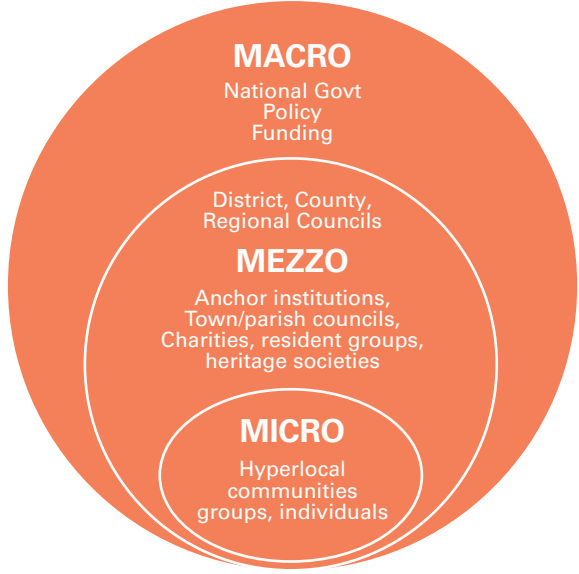

Figure 2 Mezzolevel structure - Sampson, Tofield and Branch, August 28, 2024.

Before emotional geography can effectively inform policy, it is essential to learn from the shortcomings of the previous government's Levelling Up agenda and focus on Pride-in-Place, as noted above. While the policy aimed to bridge long-standing geographical divides across the UK, the gap between political promises and regional inequality remains. To be sure, the Levelling

Up Fund, intended to address these disparities, fell short. As Thomas Pope (2023) from the Institute for Government notes, it was neither "large enough nor targeted enough" to create lasting change.

This policy flaw highlights a broader issue: the growing tendency of Whitehall to prioritise larger governance structures, which risks distancing local authorities from communities (Copus, 2023). Reflecting this trend, the current government's English Devolution White Paper (16 December 2024) advocates for reorganising local government into larger administrative units, arguing this will improve service delivery. The White Paper suggests that reducing the number of politicians while granting them more authority will streamline governance.

However, the Labour government also acknowledges the risk of losing community-level representation and stresses the need for stronger local engagement after reorganisation. It proposes closer collaboration between councils and neighbourhoods, as well as redefining the role of town and parish councils in relation to principal authorities. While the act of consolidating councils aims to improve efficiency, these larger bodies must adopt innovative governance models to maintain meaningful community connections. This emphasises the need for a new intermediary layer - or organisations that bridge large councils and local communities. Such a structure would align strategic objectives with grassroots insights, cultivating trust by

enabling bespoke solutions from diverse communities to be supported.

In CERG's critique of Levelling Up and Pride-in-Place (Sampson, Tofield, and Branch, 2024), we argued for the creation of a mezzolevel organisation. This proposal is even more relevant now. It emphasises the role of anchor institutions (universities, community interest companies, voluntary organisations, and local cultural, heritage, and arts groups) in connecting local authorities with communities. Partnering with town and parish councils, these organisations can more effectively bridge macrolevel governance and microlevel community needs. This intermediary layer would support responsive strategies by strengthening ties between local groups and broader policy frameworks.

As governance shifts toward larger administrative bodies, it is critical to address the resulting gaps in local representation. A mezzolevel organisation offers a solution to keep community voices central in decision-making. Acting as a bridge between national policies and local initiatives, the mezzolevel would enhance governance, community engagement, emotional geography, and cultural resilience. It offers a practical solution for aligning large-scale governance with the lived realities of local communities. As governance structures expand, this intermediary layer ensures that local voices remain central in shaping policies and projects, protecting community representation while cultivating collaboration across broader administrative units.

By incorporating emotional geographies – aligned to cultural identities, shared histories, and lived experiences – into policy-making, the mezzolevel aims to strengthen significant emotional connections to place and enhances civic engagement. It aims to sustain community led innovation in heritage and cultural projects, while also preserving local identity and maintaining momentum in civic participation.

The scalable design of the mezzolevel also supports regional collaboration, amplifies the social and cultural capital of communities, and delivers localised solutions that align with broader policy goals. By addressing negative emotions and supporting communities through change, for example, the mezzolevel promotes inclusive and compassionate transitions. Moreover, by encouraging sensory engagement in community design and empowering civic universities in regional development, the mezzolevel plays a key role in bridging gaps in governance. It also facilitates partnerships between local authorities and community interest companies, ensuring long-term project sustainability. Simplifying funding and reducing bureaucratic barriers further empowers communities to access resources and drive meaningful change.

Ultimately, mezzolevel organisation builds on trust, amplifies civic voices, and delivers tailored solutions that reflect the unique needs of diverse communities. It ensures that the shift to larger governance structures strengthens - rather than undermines - local identity, participation, and resilience.

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Images on pages 35 and 43 from 'Days Like These' (2019) by Simon Poulter and Sophie Mellor, Close & Remote, commissioned by Essex Cultural Diversity Project. www.closeandremote.net/portfolio/days-like-these/

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Creative Coastal Futures: developing cultural and creative industries

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Creative Coastal Futures: developing cultural and creative industries, with a case study in the Great South West

Katharine Willis, Chris Bennewith, Kasper de Graaf

Introduction

The UK is a coastal country. No one lives more than 80 miles from the coast, and in Cornwall and Devon this reduces to just 20 miles. Our coasts are a rich source of natural and cultural assets replete with places people value, visit and choose to live in. Yet our coastal communities are some of the most overlooked, challenged and deprived in the country.

The strengths in our coastal areas – around natural resources and pockets of specialised skills – are compromised by low levels of economic capacity and activity, aggravated by poor health outcomes and educational attainment in local communities.

This has created a vicious circle where low skills and capacity deters investment, while locals believe opportunities brought into the area are "not for them" (Key Cities Innovation Network 2025).

The creative industries have a role to play in helping seaside towns diversify their economies and enhance their cultural assets (House of Lords 2019), however currently they are failing to attract public and wider investment. Coastal areas – from urban to the most remote – have an essential contribution to make to inno-

vation and sustainable development with new approaches to the most pressing environmental and societal challenges. This in turn can stimulate economic as well as social prosperity through inclusive growth.

Agglomeration and building on strengths are central to the model for investing in creative industries, which has proved so successful in recent years (Bazalgette 2017, Chapain et al 2010, Siepel et al 2020). Research undertaken by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) supports expanding investment beyond the original major clusters by showing that creative microclusters – particularly those outside the major cluster areas – are just as efficient from an investment perspective (Siepel et al 2020). Some remote coastal areas make it into this model, yet most remain tantalisingly outside the charmed circle of investment due to Government policies and priorities.

This paper introduces the complex challenges in coastal communities and outlines how creative industries could offer a new approach to addressing them through four action opportunities as drivers of change: the role of place, the blue economy, innovation and regional partnerships. A case study in the Great South West illustrates this with creative and cultural industry-led projects in that region, showcasing the latent potential for creative industries to support sustainable development of coastal communities with proper investment and leadership.

2. Coastal communities: the challenges

Our coastal communities are in crisis. Almost one in four (21) of the 88 most deprived local authorities are coastal towns (House of Commons 2007). Coastal communities show patterns of deprivation caused by complex inter-linked challenges, including high levels of unemployment and mental illness, low incomes and skills, seasonal jobs, poor educational outcomes, unaffordable housing and hidden homelessness (Taylor 2010, Asthana and Prime 2023). Geographic dispersal is also an issue with one in five of the 10.4 million people living in the UK's coastal towns which are spread over 10,300 square kilometers, much of it poorly served in terms of connectivity (House of Commons 2022). Some of these factors are covered in more detail below.

2.1 Economy and Jobs

The acute need in coastal communities has been highlighted in multiple reports by Government and research organisations (ibid., Whitty and Loveless 2021, House of Lords 2019, Pragmatix Advisory 2023). A key driver of low pay is that coastal economies often revolve more around low-wage industries such as agriculture, tourism, social care, retail and hospitality than more affluent parts of the UK. Coastal tourism is estimated to contribute £4 billion to the UK economy, accounting for 18% of coastal GVA (Corfe 2019) and supporting 12% of all jobs in England and Wales (Beatty et al, 2010).

Conversely, coastal communities contain a relatively low number of jobs in high-paying sectors of the economy. A fifth (19.6%) of businesses in coastal communities are in the IT, financial services and professional services sectors, compared with over a quarter (27.4%) elsewhere in Great Britain (Corfe 2019).

Coastal communities have also seen much weaker economic growth since the financial crisis than other parts of the country (ibid.). While Britain's coastal economy grew by 7.5% between 2010 and 2017, the rest of the country grew by 17.1%. The growth gap with other parts of the country is greater than it was before the financial crisis.

The loss of traditional industries such as fishing is eroding the social fabric of communities, leading to higher unemployment and changes in social structures, such as the outmigration of young people who are unwilling to enter fishing due to its insecurity (Urquhart and Acott, 2014).

2.2 Poor Transport and Digital Connectivity

Coastal towns are often geographically remote from regional commercial centres, at the end of transport routes and unable to capture spontaneous visits from through-traffic. This attribute can translate into economic disparity with inland towns, and often means coastal towns cannot rely solely on retail for economic health. Poor access can make investment

seem less viable, increasing financial risk and making borrowing more difficult and expensive (English Heritage 2007). Many coastal areas find it hard to retain young people and recruit teachers, as they lack the required physical and digital connectivity.

Only around 60 per cent of premises on the coast had access to gigabit broadband in 2022, approximately ten percentage points less than non-coastal areas. Digital inclusion statistics show that, even where there is access, the ability of some demographics to benefit is a barrier. In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, the 2018 ONS figures show that over 13% (circa 71,000) of the adult population have never used the internet, where the national average is 8%, while 30% of residents in Cornwall do not have access to 4G (Cornwall Council 2021).

Transport access to large employment centres is more limited by the coast (Corfe 2019). Department for Transport data on the travel time to reach key services shows minimum journey times by car 7.1% higher in coastal communities. For public transport and walking, minimum journey times are 12.7% higher (ibid.). Distance from markets makes it harder for businesses to prosper, and distance from services for local people is exacerbated by poor transport connectivity.

2.3 Health, wellbeing and reliance on government services

England's coastal communities have sig-nificantly higher needs for NHS, social care and public health services than their inland counterparts. The Chief Medical Officer's (CMO's) 2021 annual report highlighted the substantially higher burden of physical and mental health conditions in coastal communities, often with lower life expectancy (Gibson and Asthana 2021). This is partly explained by the fact that coastal populations tend to be both older and more deprived than non-coastal populations. However, even after adjusting for these factors (and others including ethnicity), there still appears to be a 'coastal excess' in the prevalence of disease and risk factors (Asthana and Prime 2023).

Coastal towns require higher levels of publicly backed financial and administrative support. While employment levels are similar to those of inland towns (74.6% compared with a 75.1% average across England), there is a large discrepancy between coastal and inland towns in benefits claims. In 2006, 15.2% of the working age population in coastal towns were claiming benefits compared to 12.65% nationally. More significantly, the increase in those claiming incapacity benefits, special disability allowance or income support for disability claims since 1997 was 2.2% nationally compared with 12.3% in coastal towns (ibid.).

2.4 Climate Change

Amongst the new, and growing, pressures facing coastal communities are the predicted impacts of climate change. Without the right support, communities and businesses will struggle to make the most of the coast's abundant potential for clean energy. The NEF's 'blue new deal' report highlights how, without appropriate resources, local authorities are discouraged from innovating to protect homes and businesses from climate change (New Economics Foundation 2016).

3. Coastal communities: the opportunities

Coasts have distinctive and high-value assets, both to live in and to visit. But those place-based assets have tended to be seen only as health and wellbeing benefits, or as stimulating narrow economic sectors such as tourism. Research shows that living close to the coast has positive health and well-being benefits and living less than five kilometers from the coast improves mental health (Acott et al 2023, Bell et al 2015, Wheeler et al 2012, Gascon et al 2015). But the focus of government investment – e.g. the Coastal Communities Fund (DLUHC 2022) – has been on addressing the recognised problems, rather than focusing on how their assets, resources and capacity could be catalysed to achieve more inclusive growth.

We propose that transforming coastal communities through innovation requires inclusive growth – "economic growth that creates opportunities for all segments of the population and distributes the dividends of increased prosperity, both in monetary and non-monetary terms, fairly across society" (OECD n.d.) – to be a strategic driver. Creative industries and digital innovation have a key role to play in this process.

3.1 Coastal opportunities

Below we outline four action opportunities as drivers of change for inclusive growth in coastal areas, with the creative industries as a catalyst.

Action opportunity 1. Place: the visitor economy, heritage and new audiences

The opportunities for coastal areas can be grounded in their unique natural assets, including the sea, beaches and marine areas, which are highly valued in terms of pride in place, attachment and sense of belonging. The built heritage similarly acts as a recognised visitor destination, but also increasingly attracts creative industries with film industry locations, theatre and performance. Their natural and heritage assets give coastal towns an advantage in supporting creative industries.

Madgin and Howcroft (2024) describe the importance of place as an asset in how communities and regions develop and grow. As part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)'s Place-based Research Programme (Madgin 2021), their report seeks to evidence that 'people-centred, place-based approaches can secure a range of socio-economic outcomes'. Madgin and Howcroft outline that while place assets can include heritage, nature or people, the place-based approach sees them

as having tangible value through creating 'attachment, belonging and pride'.

Coastal places by their nature create higher levels of connection to place. For example, a study in Australia found that those living close to the marine environment held a deep place attachment and for some, these attachments endure even when they are no longer by the sea (Wynveen et al 2012). A study by Natural England found that 'connections with the coast are strong and tied up with a sense of identity, belonging, love and care that people feel towards the coast, even in situations where people are less able to physically interact with it' (Acott et al 2023, p. 411).

Practically, their value as places means that coastal towns and regions are vital destinations for tourism, since the availability of natural and built resources affects the attractiveness of locations for tourism-related economic development (House of Commons 2007). Coastal tourism contributes significantly to the UK economy, accounting for £8.9bn in expenditure and over 30% of all tourism trips in coastal economies, and supporting around 180,000 jobs (Tourism Alliance 2013).

Beyond tourism, coastal resorts may be appropriate sites for cultural re-imagining as they have long engaged in place-promotion and undertaken strategies for reinvention (Ward 2018, p. 125). The value of place in coastal communities is therefore linked not just to the natural environment, but to the sense of identity and attachment these

places create. This provides opportunities for reimagining how connecting to coastal spaces can create new audiences, new ways to connect with heritage, and how this can reinvent new futures for coastal communities.

Action opportunity 2. The Blue Economy: marine economy, climate change and sustainable coastal management

The blue economy concept originated from the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development at Rio de Janeiro in 2012 (Lee et al 2020). It has many definitions, but in the broadest sense it is "all economic activities related to oceans, seas and coasts" (Kontovas et al 2022). In economic terms, this has referred to industries such as ports, offshore wind and shipbuilding, and tourism is also one of the key income generators.

A relatively undeveloped growth potential in coastal areas is represented by the spillover benefits and assets from the blue economy which have the potential to innovate and lead the reinvention of their coastal places. The blue economy is said to offer indirect opportunities to coastal communities through national (blue) economic development trickling down to coastal citizens in the form of new jobs and financial opportunities (Evans et al 2023, New Economics Foundation 2016). The coastal innovation imperative outlined by Glavovic (2013) highlights the vital need for coastal areas to innovate in order to address the particular challenges of climate change

that challenge the future of the coast and marine environments.

Growth industries such as offshore wind and net zero initiatives create the impetus for change and also attract large-scale investment. Over half of our energy needs are met by energy that comes from UK seas. The potential for offshore and marine renewable energy in the UK is more than six times our current annual electricity demand (Balata and Williams 2014). Transforming coastal communities requires creative and methodological approaches for how communities and skillsets adapt and change to new resilient models. As NEF highlights, the way to achieve healthy coastal and marine environments is to be innovative and creative and through strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation (New Economics Foundation 2016). But the role of creative industries in these areas of growth is currently underexplored.

Action opportunity 3. Innovation at the edge: innovation, digital skills and entrepreneurship

A more inclusive approach is needed to understand how coastal spaces can drive economic growth, addressing a gap in the models of development for coastal regions. Coastal regions are also places of innovation and regeneration and can be understood as being driven by what Glavovic terms 'an innovation imperative' (Glavovic 2013). This states that "innovation is necessary to escape the vulnerability trap created by past innovations that have degrad-

ed coastal ecosystems and imperil coastal livelihoods. The innovation imperative is to reframe and underpin business and technology with coherent governance innovations that lead to social transformation for coastal sustainability" (ibid., p. 934).

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) identifies innovation as one of the opportunities for coastal areas, but evidence suggests that some local cultures do not prioritise change and innovation, and this may reduce the scope for taking full advantage of new opportunities (Marine Management Organisation 2021). The MMO report highlights the issues of path dependency and a reliance on traditional industries such as heritage, ports and tourism. Coastal regions need to prioritise new models of innovation to escape their past and create new economic futures. This requires constant change and innovation (Simmie et al 2008, p.25). But innovation in coastal areas is not well understood, with limited research concerning the nature of innovations and determinants of success (Elrick-Barr et al 2024).

One area of opportunity is for creative industries to create new catalysts for growth and reimagining the future of coastal spaces. There has been some limited investment in the UK to cultivate creative industries as a mechanism for economic growth and innovation at the coast. The House of Lords Select Committee report 'The Future of Seaside Towns' highlighted the value of regional innovation policies supporting investment in the digital sector

for wider accessibility of services and jobs, a good provision of affordable workspaces, and the uplift of local skills by providing training programmes for start-ups (House of Lords 2019).

Liminal spaces such as coastal regions are recognised as sites of innovation. Innovation is not merely about thinking out of the box, but also about being 'on the edge' (Samimian-Darash et al 2024), but such innovation is often dispersed and fragmented. The government has recognised the need to diversify coastal economies and recommended support "to recognise, promote and support diversification in coastal areas where a sole reliance on tourism is no longer a viable option" (House of Commons 2022). There may be opportunities for developing businesses within the cultural and creative sector, particularly around digital and media technologies, which would enhance the connectivity of coastal towns (Walton and Brown 2010).

Post COVID, the tech industry in particular has seen ongoing migration from metropolitan areas to the countryside. An increase in home working enabled by digital technology has allowed some people living in coastal areas to secure better paid, higher skilled jobs with employers based in cities and elsewhere in the country, boosting opportunities and local incomes. Improving digital connectivity and expertise in remote areas can enable new models of entrepreneurialism using links between creative and cultural sectors.

Coastal regions have high levels of entrepreneurship. The role this can play in supporting coastal communities to survive and prosper highlights the crucial nature of enterprise as a key driver of growth (Centre for Entrepreneurship 2015). Coastal areas have a very high rate of SMEs, with corporate brands representing less than 3% of the total (National Coastal Tourism Academy, n.d.). The House of Lords (2019) pointed to the efficacy of arts-led economic and social regeneration strategies, backed by initiatives such as the DCMS Sea Change programme (2008–2010), which provided £37 million to projects that used culture to contribute to social and economic regeneration of seaside resorts (Ward 2018).

Some places have seen the creative industries boost local regeneration. The opening of the Turner Contemporary in Margate, for example, has stimulated development of a wider creative sector in the area (House of Lords 2019). Brighton is another place that has successfully demonstrated linkage between strong local environments, the presence of a young, innovative population, and economic growth (Fiorentino et al 2024). The innovation opportunity in coastal communities lies in the culture of entrepreneurialism and growth in skillsets and capacity, especially in digital.

Action opportunity 4. Coastal partnerships, networks and ecosystems

Creative industries prosper in geographical clusters, where they benefit from a proximity to skills, customers and knowl-

edge (Siepel et al 2020). Strengthening network and cluster development is one way to empower creatives to contribute to inclusive growth. Knowledge and value can be generated through networks. Creative industries leaders are powerful network connectors who are active amongst hard-to-reach communities and confident communicating with local government and with cross-disciplinary stakeholders.

Coastal towns can offer low-cost, high-quality living to an increasingly mobile workforce, providing the supply-side conditions in which cultural and creative industries thrive (English Heritage 2007). Researchers at the University of Falmouth found evidence of innovation in Cornwall delivered through a large number of creative hubs, providing spaces and resource for convening and building creative communities, often nurturing and maintaining a complex set of relationships and partnerships. They argue that hubs act as nodes in a network, helping to create the conditions for collaboration, experimentation and innovation, which in turn can fuel creative and business development and boost productivity. This is of particular importance in dispersed rural areas, where natural co-location of creative businesses is less likely to occur (Falmouth University Centre for Heritage, Culture & Society 2021). Coastal communities offer a fertile space for partnership and collaboration, fuelled by cross-sectoral R&D and capacity building, in a model that is different from current urban economic models.

3.2 Coastal communities: opportunities matrix

Table 1 summarises how the opportunities described could map to some of the recognised challenges faced by coastal regions. The third column indicates wider impacts and potential new futures for coastal communities.

4. Case study: creative coastal futures in the Great South West

We have outlined our vision of the opportunity for addressing long-term and complex socio-economic challenges in coastal communities through creative industries innovation. We now contextualise this approach through this case study of the Great South West (GSW) as an exemplar.

Method

In the case study we seek to understand how the opportunities identified in the matrix (Table 1) could be exemplified by showing how the creative industries might contribute to the impacts in a coastal region. The case study focuses on the Great South West (GSW) region of England[1], from Dorset through to Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

The case study is in two parts: the first a quantitative study of the potential eco-

1 The Great South West is the 'powerhouse' brand to promote the LEP areas of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Heart of the South West and Dorset. It aims to deliver £45bn of economic benefit and become the leading region for the green and blue economy.

Table 1: Coastal communities opportunities matrix

Action opportunities	Challenge areas	Potential socio-economic impact
1. Place: the visitor economy, heritage and new audiences	Poor health and wellbeing, seasonal tourism, reliance on public services	Increased sense of place, young people stay, health and wellbeing, regeneration through cultural placemaking, less seasonality in local economy
2. The Blue Economy: marine economy, climate change and sustainable coastal management	Effects of climate change, transport connectivity, sustainability, poor coastal management	Spillover effects, community agency in addressing climate, creative methods for sustainability and coastal management and development, creative industries capacity-building in net zero sectors
3. Innovation at the edge: innovation, digital skills and entrepreneurship	Lack of suitable jobs, investment, digital and infrastructure	Increase in pathways and jobs for locals, growth in SMEs, entrepreneurship and creative infrastructure, digital innovation, new industries, more high-skilled workers relocating to coastal areas
4. Coastal partnerships, networks and ecosystems	Poor governance, lack of a model for regional growth, sector silos	Multiplier effects of cross-sector R&D, knowledge growth, capacity building, shared infrastructure and support

nomic impact of the creative industries in GSW; the second reviewing the impact of creative programmes in the region.

The first part draws on a 2024 study that identifies the characteristics of the creative industries in GSW (Evans 2024)[2]. This study undertook a systematic data analysis of creative industries businesses in GSW by subsector, as well as exploring how spillover effects from creative compa-

2 The data relating to Creative Industries in the GSW in this section is taken from 'Creativity at the Edge - Innovation and growth in the Creative Industries in the Great South West', a document developed in 2024 for the GSW Board by a group led by Falmouth University, supported by the University of Plymouth, Arts University Plymouth, Bournemouth University, Arts University Bournemouth and Exeter University.

nies' activity drive economic growth. This provides a data-informed analysis of the opportunities and the geographical clustering of the creative industries in the GSW coastal region for inclusive growth.

The second part reviews the outcomes of a series of large-scale funded programmes, primarily led by academics from University of Plymouth over the last five years. These programmes used a range of creative methods and interventions to capitalise on the latent potential of place, the blue economy, innovation and partnerships. In each example project, we map the case study outcomes to our opportunity matrix and discuss the consequent socio-economic impact.

4.1 The Great South West's cultural and creative assets

The Great South West is emerging as a creative contender. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows that while the GSW had only 2.4 percent of creative industry jobs in 2022, it had the joint fastest jobs growth in this sector of any British region over the 2019-22 period (4.1 percent CAGR), tying with the East Midlands. Over the longer term (2015-22), the GSW's creative industries jobs growth rate (2.8 percent CAGR) was as high as 80% of that in London (3.5 percent CAGR), which dominates the UK creative industries with 40 percent of sectoral employment. Within the GSW, creative industries jobs grew faster in 2019-2022 than in every other major sector except arts and entertainment, with which the creative industries substantially overlap.

Our new analysis reveals that at least 15,870 creative industries companies are registered in the GSW and active as of 1 July 2024. Around 70 percent are located within 22 geographical clusters, with significant presence in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Exeter and Exmouth, Plymouth, and Falmouth. Collectively, these companies employ at least 34,600 people and turn over upwards of £2.3 billion per year. Our data suggests that in 2022 the creative industries generated more GVA in the GSW (£2.7 billion) than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined (£1.9 billion according to ONS).

Plymouth, known for its strong marine and maritime links, is increasingly viewed as an exciting location for its cultural and creative assets, such as the Theatre Royal – the largest regional producing theatre in England, The Box and the Market Hall Immersive Dome in Devonport. These assets alongside planned and previous events such as Dazzle and Illuminate are animating the city in new and different ways.

In the wider GSW, Tate St Ives attracts 240,000 visitors per year and brings £11 million to the local economy (Tate 2015).

The GSW has unique advantages when it comes to the creative industries with three specialist creative industries universities (Falmouth University, Arts University Plymouth and Arts University Bournemouth) and three other universities (Bournemouth, Plymouth and Exeter) which also have strong specialisms in creative industries subjects. Between them, data provided by the six universities show they produced over 6,700 highly skilled graduates in creative and createch disciplines in 2023-24 (excluding IT and tech graduates from the non-specialist universities) and attracted £33.6 million of research grant funding over the 2021-24 period directly supporting the creative sector and innovation cross-sectors, such as agritech and health tech, with R&D, incubation programmes and state-of-the-art facilities.

The GSW had faster jobs growth over 2019-22 than the national average in advertising and marketing; architecture; IT, software and computer services (the largest subsector); as well as in the creative industries as a whole. Our mid-2024 analysis shows that music, performing and visual arts contributed a higher share of the GSW's GVA (15.6 percent) than the UK 2022 average (9.1 percent – DCMS 2024), hinting at the significant potential of this subsector. The GSW is home to the world's largest greenfield music festival, Glastonbury, and accounts for a substantial share of the two million music tourists who visited the South West region as a whole in 2023, ranking it second only behind London for music tourism spend and employment (UK Music 2024).

Other evidence suggests that GSW's creative industries are becoming more innovative and able to take advantage of R&D funding. GSW creative companies captured £1.7 million of Innovate UK grant funding in 2022-23, an amount that has surged since 2020 (UKRI 2024). Forty-one percent of this – almost £700,000 – went to 10 organisations based in Cornwall, where Cornwall Council's industrial strategy has targeted interventions with creative companies for a number of years.

4.2 Creative programmes

The three case studies in this section – two based in Plymouth and the third reaching across regional boundaries into Cornwall – exemplify how creative and cultural industries, taking a place-based approach, can leverage the opportunities latent in coastal communities to tackle some of the broader socio-economic challenges we have identified. In each example, we map the case study outcomes to our opportunity matrix (see Section 3).

4.2.1 Place: iMayflower

Running between 2019 and 2023, iMayflower was an ambitious programme to develop Plymouth's creative industries, with a focus on immersive and digital technologies. The project included a £3.5 million grant from the Cultural Development Fund (CDF), a programme from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Arts Council England designed to enable transformative, culture-led economic growth and productivity. iMayflower was a partnership between the University of Plymouth, Plymouth City Council, Real Ideas Organisation, Plymouth College of Art, Destination Plymouth, Creative England and Crowdfunder UK.

The consortium supported businesses and communities across targeted sectors including the creative and cultural industries, marine, advanced manufacturing, health and wellbeing and tourism. The aim was to support local innovation by connecting key economic pillars in the city region with the abundant creative capability or capacity available in the Plymouth area, ranging from the use of digital technologies through to creative leadership skills.

Activity included:

  ○ Connecting the two Universities'

Table 2. iMayflower case study outcomes

Challenge areas	Potential socio-economic impact	Outcomes
Seasonal tourism, over-reliance on tourist economy	Less seasonality in economy	○ An opportunity for students and businesses to undertake higher value / more productive work in the city, as opposed to low-wage options in tourism and agriculture ○ The capability and capacity for established businesses to innovate through connections with creatives, both students and other businesses
Exodus of young people	Encouraging young people to stay	○ A reason for students to stay in the city post-graduation – some stickability in the form of future options for staying and creating a business in the region
Lack of connection to place	Increased sense of place through culture-led regeneration	○ Audiences coming to some of the more deprived / less visited parts of the city through the Illuminate festival, which in turn drove economic benefits for bars and restaurants, fuelling a night-time economy in areas where there wouldn't normally be people
Long-term deprivation, poor health and wellbeing	Health and wellbeing	○ Opportunities created for children from areas of high social and economic deprivation to encounter new technologies and creative thinking where they may not have done previously

facilities for digital fabrication and immersive media with businesses, students and staff to develop innovative products, services and experiences.

○ Creating the IGNITE Festival of Creativity and Digital Platform to showcase the creative talent of the city's graduating students, connecting them with employers with the aim of retaining creative talent in Plymouth.

○ Providing the iLead Creative and Cultural Leadership Development Programme to drive cross-sector collaboration and respond to city-wide challenges around creative placemaking, immersive futures and sustainability.

○ Providing an innovative placements scheme to pair students and graduates from creative disciplines with businesses to help accelerate their research and development.

○ Running Plymouth Startup Weekend to encourage and enable budding entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs to thrive.

○ Providing access to finance and mentoring for companies or individuals with an idea they want to progress that spanned the creative industries and either health, tourism and/or the marine sector

○ Staging the Illuminate Light Festival, which attracted more than 50,000 people in its final weekend

○ Supporting the development of the Market Hall in Devonport

4.2.2 The Blue Economy: Sea for Yourself

The most recent large-scale partnership project for Plymouth comes in the form of a successful Arts Council England Place Partnership bid entitled Sea for Yourself. This will provide a once-in-a-generation transformational Cultural Programme aligned with the newly-established Plymouth Sound National Marine Park (https://plymouthsoundnationalmarinepark.com) (PSNMP) and its associated programme supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). The first marine park in the UK, PSNMP has been awarded £9.5 million by NLHF for a five-year programme to develop an innovative new model to encourage greater prosperity and engagement with the marine environment.

Through a partnership approach, Sea for Yourself aims to harness the full potential of arts, culture and creativity in the city to engage new audiences with the Marine Park through cultural interventions, reconnecting disenfranchised communities with place, nature and their cultural identity. A series of cultural commissions and creative digital initiatives in, on and/or around the Park, informed by data insights, will connect Plymothians with their marine environment and heritage as central elements in the city's identity and future placemaking.

Table 3. Blue Economy case study outcomes

Challenge areas	Potential socio-economic impact	Outcomes
Climate change impact and sustainability	Spillover effects	○ The creation of new jobs through development of new creative products, services and experiences in, on or around PSNMP
Poor coastal management	Creative methods for connectivity, sustainability and coastal management	○ Foregrounding the PSNMP as a centre of meaning and social infrastructure ○ Developing bespoke co-creative approaches and experiences with audiences to create a sense of belonging for Plymothians ○ Developing inclusive processes, based on equitable partnerships
Access to blue spaces, transport connectivity	Creative industries capacity building in net zero sectors	○ Driving a behavioural shift in residents to become more active marine citizens and cultural participants, supporting health and wellbeing and a sense of pride in place

Table 4. Entrepreneurial Futures case study outcomes

Challenge areas	Potential socio-economic impact	Outcomes
Lack of entrepreneurship and R&D capacity	New digital skillsets and capacity for innovation	○ New collaborations between sectors through university, creative industries and third sector, building entrepreneurship, upskilling SMEs
Lack of digital skills and infrastructure	Local creative infrastructure, digital innovation, new industries	○ Creative hubs have developed new R&D capacity in digital and immersive
Lack of jobs and large-scale investment	Increase in jobs for locals, more SMEs, more high-skilled workers relocating to coastal areas	○ Two spin-out SMEs have been created

4.2.3 Innovation: Entrepreneurial Futures immersive programme

The partnership model for creative transformation is being developed at a regional scale in Cornwall, where the University of Plymouth is working to develop the immersive technology sector. The £5.6 million Shared Prosperity Fund-supported Entrepreneurial Futures project uses immersive technologies to test out the partnership model of innovation to drive economic growth by connecting businesses with the region's further and higher education institutions through research and development-led activities. The project links university academics with industry partners to explore how immersive technologies – including augmented (AR), mixed (MR) and virtual reality (VR) and 360 Full Dome – can be used for innovation, audience engagement and problem solving across a wide range of contexts and industries. In Cornwall, Screen Cornwall, Creative Kernow and the Digital Future Academy are undertaking complementary projects to incubate ambitious createch and immersive projects centred on community and place.

The University of Plymouth tested the benefits of creative R&D capacity building through a 'Design Researcher in Residence' (DRiR) codesign model. This focused on capacity building alongside a series of digital innovations and systems comprising immersive media IP assets, new services, new experiences, and new audiences for Cornwall-based partners and their unique place-based conditions.

Liaising with local partners, the University facilitated the building of relationships to support coproduction of digital solutions which are sensitive to those users and respond directly to their needs and expectations. To achieve this, the work package funded projects that address the challenge of immersive technologies in Cornwall through a three-way partnership with an academic and an external organisation – the DRiR model.

The DRiR embeds digital and creative methods within the mode of research, recognising the importance of knowledge, concepts and methods in achieving meaningful outcomes, stimulating the real-world application of high-quality arts and humanities-led design research to address challenges related to achieving goals. Each of the projects linked a university researcher with an external organisation and employed a 'design researcher' who was based in the organisation but co-supervised by the organisation and the researcher. The aim was to drive R&D through entrepreneurial methods.

Funding has enabled seven projects with three areas of focus. Immersive technologies can connect people to place, create new audience experiences and new immersive approaches to enabling participation with communities. One project demonstrating this was working with Wildworks Theatre Company (https://wildworks.org.uk), the UK's leading landscape theatre company, which makes site-specific theatre with communities locally, nationally and internationally. The R&D collaboration is developing a new immersive capability, which takes Wildworks' site-specific performances to new audiences and creates new connections to place through mixed-reality interfaces.

4.2.4 Partnerships

All the projects capitalised on partnerships and new models of geographic impact as described in Section 3, with the University of Plymouth as a key partner working closely with a range of civic, educational and commercial entities. They strengthened partnership, network and cluster development as a mechanism through which to empower creatives to contribute to inclusive growth.

5. Creative coastal futures

Given the cultural and creative assets in the GSW and the strong precedent for partnership working at a city and pan-regional scale, we believe there is an opportunity for this coastal region, and others, to catalyse the growth of their creative industries through a coastal corridor model. This draws on the recent Creative Industries PEC report on Creative Corridors, which notes that "large geographic areas in different regions could realise some of the economic returns akin to a supercluster, without the urban density of a large city, perhaps even including coastal and rural creative economies" (Hay et al 2024). This requires a regional strategy and national policy. Lord Bassam of Brighton,

who chaired the Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities, stated in 2023 that "…we have seen little progress in seaside towns and communities and their endemic problems continue to persist… This demands a long-term strategy from the Government." (House of Lords 2023).

The opportunity for building creative clusters in coastal communities lies not so much in developing recognised creative industry strengths in an urban model of development, but instead in addressing the challenges that are present in coastal communities. This creates the potential to catalyse natural and place-based assets and develop innovative approaches by creative enterprise, working in concert with industry, public services, anchor institutions and local stakeholders.
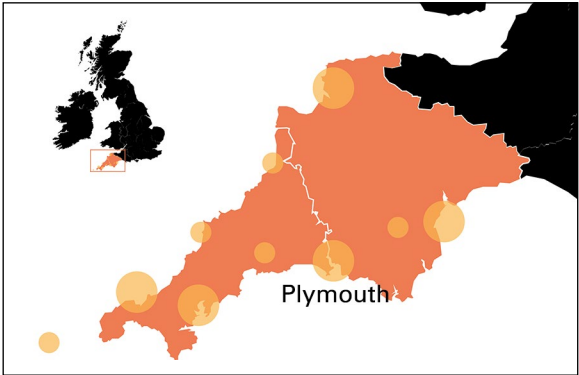

Fig 1: Creative coastal clusters and microclusters (Siepel et al 2020, detail).

Further exploration

We propose that the viability and scalability of potential models for creative industries-led regeneration of coastal areas should be explored through a Research and Innovation programme of demonstrators working with academic, creative industries, stakeholder and community partners in remote coastal areas in different parts of the country. The aim is to evaluate the use of creative industries for tapping into the potential of these areas, creating a sustainable future for young people, families and the ageing population, connecting with established innovation ecosystems and exploring models for innovation and investment in other remote and disadvantaged areas.

The proposal envisages strategic investment in new creative coastal corridors linking up clusters and microclusters with four action opportunities as drivers of change:

○ Place: Building on coastal people and place assets through creative industries that address coastal communities' challenges around health, skills, employment and social mobility

○ Blue economy: Engaging local people and communities with their heritage and environment, with agency in addressing challenges of climate change and coastal erosion

○ Innovation: Investment in creative R&D with a focus on immersive and digital technologies that create new connections and capacity at the edge

○ Partnerships: Cross-sectoral collaboration between geographical clusters and sharing of infrastructure, capacity and resource

The impact of this growth would be felt not only in terms of an increased economic contribution from an already thriving sector, but perhaps more importantly, in terms of addressing some of the long-term and complex socio-economic challenges faced by coastal communities such as lack of jobs, lack of infrastructure and lack of hope.

Stimulating the creative and cultural sectors and bringing them together strategically across the region would enable the cities, towns and region to participate fully in this national growth opportunity with benefits for all.

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Image p47: Plymouth National Marine Acquarium. Photo: Phil Rees.

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Collaborative participatory mapping as a method for capturing local community-based knowledge

University of Southampton

Collaborative participatory mapping as a method for capturing local community-based knowledge: a Southampton case study

Elizabeth Reed, Laura Paddon, Eleanor Wilkinson, Cathryn MacLeod

Abstract

This paper outlines a participatory methodology which facilitates strengthening, identifying and understanding the cultural spaces utilised by minoritised groups. Traditional data collection methods can fail to capture the nuances of everyday cultural practices, in response the pilot study detailed here deploys a novel, low cost, participatory collaborative mapping methodology. The research aimed to: (1) create a space for community building and knowledge sharing, and (2) capture the intangible aspects of subcultural practices as it manifests in diverse and often overlooked locations. Working with local partners including a community centre, small business owners, and community group organisers, our pilot found that "cultural space" extends beyond designated or expected venues, instead encompassing parks, commercial spaces, and even domestic settings. The study emphasises the importance of understanding the subjective experiences of safety, belonging, and community in shaping cultural landscapes (see Reed et al, 2023 for full discussion). The collaborative participatory mapping method provides a valuable tool for empowering community members, fostering dialogue, capturing intangible cultural practices, and generating data to inform more inclusive and effective urban planning and cultural policy. Recommendations for replicating and adapting the method for use in different cities with different populations are made, with some discussion of setting measures for success.

The problem: how to see where culture happens

Culture is ordinary (Williams, 1958 [2014]: 3). It is something shared and made by groups of people who cohere, in different ways, into communities. Culture and belonging are part of a pattern of everyday life, but not all individuals are included in the model of normative citizenship through which practices are identified and for which spaces are anticipated and designed (Gelder, 1997: 343). Understanding the value of cultural spaces to the continued health and diversity of communities, especially those comprised of minoritised groups, can therefore be challenging, especially when such locations are diffuse, temporary, and situated outside of mainstream cultural norms. Groups who are "represented as non-normative and/or marginal" and subject to "social classification and regulation" may respond by embracing such classification, choosing to celebrate, relish or exploit their differences as distinct subcultural identities (Gelder, 1997: 1). Thus, subcultural group membership can offer ways for minoritised people to manage and transform negative charac-

terisations which accompany social classification based on their particular interests and practices (ibid). Significantly, subcultures can be understood as something which "binds people together" and which take place in space and in communication with others (Gelder, 1997: 6). Subcultures are therefore facilitated by places which allow participants to "lay claim to a sense of belonging, even exclusivity" (Gelder, 1997: 315). The challenge for planners and policy makers seeking to ensure space is available for minoritised communities to share knowledge and sustain diverse subcultural practices is the relative invisibility of these everyday practices and their locations. We therefore set out to design a simple, low-cost methodology (see Table 1) which can capture the lived experiences of building and sharing culture for minoritised and/or vulnerable groups. Our aim was twofold: (1) to create space for people to share everyday, cultural activities and knowledge in order to support the building of community ties. And (2) to capture information about intangible culture as it coheres in transient spaces, events, and evolves through sharing of inter-personal knowledge and relationships in order to grasp the use of cultural spaces in a city.

Our pilot prioritised participatory, small scale, qualitative data. Quantitative and large-scale data already exist on measures of wellbeing, inclusion, reported crime, and use of cultural spaces in the pilot city (Southampton Data Observatory 2021, 2023), but these data do not offer insight

Table 1. Resources required for running one event

Resource	Approx. costs
Printing: ○ approx. 50 flyers and posters for advertising discussion events ○ A0 printing of maps for annotation (usually 1 map per discussion event) ○ prompt cards	£50-£100
Consumables: ○ packs of sticky notes, pens and stickers ○ light refreshments for 20 participants	£150-£200
Staffing (min. 2 facilitators/researchers per event) ○ 2 hours for event ○ 1 hour for prep and set up/pack down at event	£150 (min. c. £25 per hour incl. oncosts)
Staffing (per project): ○ literature and scoping desk-research to develop prompts before event approx. 10 hours for 1 researcher. ○ Expert interviews (if needed) to evaluate stakeholder needs, approx. 5 hours ○ Transcription of 5 hours of interviews, approx. 20 hours. ○ Review and analysis of data for all workshops combined, minimum of 2 researchers, approx. 20 hours	£1,875 (min. c. £25 per hour incl. oncosts)
Approx. total	£2,225–£2,325

into why some spaces are underutilised, how commercial spaces fit together with cultural and social spaces, nor why the city is chosen (or not) as a destination compared to other urban centres within easy commuting distance. Additionally, diversity of experience in minority groups may not be accurately represented in large scale surveys due to issues with representative weighting in sampling (Brayne and Moffitt 2022; Guyan 2022; Ruberg and Ruelos 2020). Ensuring affirmative policies are developed requires insight into both the texture and diversity of experience of these groups, which can be achieved through a qualitative heuristic (Balsas, 2022; Tomaszewski et al, 2020). It can, however, be challenging to engage minority and minoritised groups in further research as they may be over surveyed, feel there is little direct benefit of their participation (Ashley 2021; Tourangeau 2019; Vincent, 2018), or be isolated from networks through which participants are recruited (Westwood, 2013). A participatory approach prioritises participant voice over an authoritative or extractive dynamic and offers space for participant contributions to be valued in the moment in which they are made (Aldridge 2014, 2015; Fenge 2010). As we detail below, our method curated space for community building and connection as part of the process of data collection, thus offering in-kind contributions to participants of the very phenomena we invited them to explore. We propose that comparative and textured insights into use and feelings about city space can enhance quantitative

data by providing insight into the affective life of the city for residents which cannot be accessed through large scale surveys.

The context: minoritised populations and isolation

LGBTQ+ people are a minoritised group with a distinct culture and whose access to space is uneven across the UK. Previous research has argued there is little research on the lives and needs of LGBTQ+ people in local contexts in changing times in the UK; research to address this gap is needed to ensure meaningful engagement with these communities (c.f Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Browne and Bakshi, 2011; Rooke, 2007). In times of social change and crisis, networks of connection and community become particularly important for lesbian and gay people (Ellis, 2007). The precarity of a sustained period of fiscal austerity and reductions to social welfare, have been compounded by the pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis in the UK, which is accelerating most acutely in queer capitals such as London, Manchester and Brighton and Hove. These conditions constrict the choices of economically precarious and working-class LGBTQ+ people regarding where they choose to settle, and their opportunity to travel to queer scenes in large[r] cities where they might previously have been able to fulfil their needs for community and cultural inclusion. The paucity of knowledge on current access to cultural space and community has consequences for how public health initiatives

to support theses populations can be developed, and for the understanding of if and how LGBTQ+ subcultures are enacted in 'ordinary cities' which lack distinct queer-cultural hubs around which people can gather (Brown, 2008, Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2015, Podmore, 2016, Tongson, 2011). Moreover, as a result of restrictions on movement and access to social spaces during the COVID-19 emergency, LGBTQ+ people experienced greater social isolation, elevated risk of violence, and worse health outcomes than comparable heterosexual populations (Baumel et al, 2021; Gato et al, 2021; Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2022; Moore et al, 2021; Morgan et al, 2021). Lesbian people are further at risk from these pressures, with previous research finding they are at greater risk of isolation than straight women or gay men (Ellis, 2007; McLaren, 2009), consistently reporting lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction compared to their straight peers (Southampton Data Observatory, 2021). Access to cultural space and community belonging is strongly associated with protective factors for health, safety and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, understanding lesbian communities in local contexts is especially urgent if these groups are to be supported to flourish through future policy and cultural initiatives (Browne, 2008, Brown-Saracino 2017, Forstie 2020, Stone 2018).

Resultingly, our focus was on spaces available for lesbian people in Southampton; engaging with this sub-group of a wider LGBTQ+ population provided opportunity to grasp in detail the spatial resources and needs of those people who cohere around a lesbian subculture and are frequently under-represented or subsumed in a broader focus on LGBTQ+ communities (Podmore, 2006; 2016). Southampton is a relatively small city on the South coast of England, home to two Universities with a student population of 43,000 (Southampton Data Observatory, 2023) and a total population of just under 250,000 (ONS, 2022). Census data suggests that 4.93% of the population of Southampton describe their sexuality something other than heterosexual which is higher than the proportion for England as a whole (3.17%) (ONS, 2023). Despite a comparatively large LGBTQ+ population, Southampton has few explicitly identified LGBTQ+ social and cultural spaces, and no dedicated lesbian spaces. Previous research on lesbian lives in small towns has found that a fragmented community and few or no lesbian-only spaces are not automatically barriers to a sense of belonging, acceptance, and perceptions of safety (Browne, 2008; Brown-Saracino, 2011; 2017) but understanding where these subcultural practices can be shared is essential to foster conditions in which self-organising community can be built.

Partnerships and stakeholders

Projects which capture local, specific and hidden knowledge from marginalised or minoritised groups can offer insights not available in existing research or data sets, providing value to a range of stakeholders seeking to support or identify the needs of diverse groups and respond proactively to EDI initiatives and funder priorities, to ensure innovations and services are "by everyone, for everyone" (UKRI, 2023). We initiated partnerships with community stakeholders. Our main partner was a local community arts, café, pantry and social space which was seeking ways to diversify and solidify their community engagement and hub-building to secure long-term financial security and respond to changing social, cultural and community needs in Southampton. We also worked with community group organisers and small business owners in the city who sought to understand how their events or venues were received and gain insight into how locations were identified as welcoming locations by LGBTQ+ people. These partners were engaged in the research through expert interviews and consultation on their needs.

Project stakeholders included Southampton City Council's Public Health Team, Southampton Drug and Alcohol Service, various community groups and CICs in the city, and lesbian people themselves. These stakeholders and partners are all geographically specific but represent groups and organisations which are common across the UK. Further, the local focus of the project offered detailed insights into the geographically specific challenges and opportunities for achieving positive impacts through strategies to support culture in the city. Noting the unique needs and expression of culture by region is important in developing meaningful strategies to address the specific cultural and community needs of a place.

The innovation: collaborative participatory mapping

In three discussion events (two held in-person in the city, one online via Zoom) we invited self-identified lesbian people (recruited through posters in the city, online and offline community groups, and personal networks) to annotate hand drawn maps of the city . We used prompt cards to ask participants to reflect on: safety; activities; access; lesbians (or your community); the COVID-19 pandemic; and anything else. These open-ended written prompts were supplemented with verbal prompts and encouragement from group facilitators as participants began to add material to the maps. Topics for these prompts were developed following identification of gaps in knowledge regarding use of city space, belonging and wellbeing, and the cultural life of this group. Prompts were also designed to further knowledge of the specific context of Southampton which could not be deduced from existing studies regarding lesbian culture in large urban hubs such as London and Brighton and Hove. A fuller discussion of the relationship between this background literature search and the open-ended prompts developed by the research team is detailed in our research article 'Mapping lesbians' everyday commu-

nity-making in a small city: (In)visibility, belonging and safety' (Reed et al, 2023). Our research takes the position that any insights or data is co-produced in process by researchers and participants; prompts were designed to facilitate wide-ranging discussion on the topic of lesbian community and space. We made sense of this data through careful critical reflection and valuing of co-produced and subjective insights, rather than insisting on producing 'objective' or quantifiable data (see Mathijssen et al, 2023 for more on the value and process of this approach). In future studies, prompts should likewise be developed in response to an initial literature search and data audit which flags areas of knowledge paucity, acknowledges the situated knowledge of researchers and community members, and offers opportunities for comparative insight between groups or spaces.

The collaborative mapping activity provided space for participants to chart their complex relationships to urban space and lesbian community formation, opening-up the study into a variety of diffuse sites across the city. Interaction with the map acted as a proxy for movement around the city; we were able to observe the processes by which individuals share their everyday movements and collaboratively produce spaces as culturally 'lesbian' from the un-differentiated heterosexual space of the city.

Inviting participants, who mostly had not met before, to report their experiences of the city and 'fix' elements of their experi-

ence or opinion to a map requires time and space to build rapport and confidence; our method embeds strategies to support this. For example, providing written prompts on tables (in-person events) or displayed on screen alongside the map (online events) created space for unpressured silent reflection and thinking as participants looked at different prompts, and familiarised themselves with the materials and map. Similarly, the method offers immediate demonstration of the value of participation as it happens, allowing participants to see their contributions as part of a whole tapestry constructing a collaborative vision of the city, rather than relying solely on feedback to participants after data collection is complete. The practical task – annotating a map with stickers, sticky notes, pens or images – rather than soliciting only verbal responses to the prompts and topic offered opportunities for participants to make visible their presence in the city and see the impact their contribution had in how the city was mapped. A map produced in one discussion event which shows the range of ways in which participants recorded their experiences, using both sticky notes, stickers, and clustering of notes in certain areas (see Figure 1). As well as the content of these notes offering insight into the meanings and value associated with the space, the varied accounts of different spaces demonstrate the contested and multi-dimensional meanings of a given space. These maps represent a subjective, affective and evolving experience of the city as collaboratively recounted by participants.

Fig. 1. A full map from one discussion event, showing distribution of notes across the city

We argue it is through this affective lens that it is possible to grasp the value of access to cultural space for a given group: culture is a collaborative, active, felt phenomenon, not one which sits statically in a building waiting to be visited by individuals and this method allows this to be represented.

Participatory collaborative mapping produces a diffuse and multi-layered understanding of how the city is experienced by this group. Participants guided us through their city, allowing us to observe the process by which individuals share experiences and knowledge to collaboratively build belonging. The collaborative mapping was more than just a way to collect the 'places' of significance for lesbian people in the city; it created space for conversations that continued after the conclusion of discussion events with participants sharing recommendations, stories about lesbian spaces, and swapping phone numbers. These organic moments of culture-building emerged through the focus on and valuing of subcultural knowledge which we supported and validated through our association with an authority (i.e. a university). When institutional actors (universities, government agencies) create spaces to record and acknowledge subcultural practices it can be a powerful route to demonstrate commitment to valuing diversity and to engage minoritised groups with ongoing conversations about their needs and access in a city. A key implication of this method is therefore how

collaborative mapping can offer a tool for delivering more inclusive participatory knowledge which can help foster and support transformative and emancipatory spaces in which participants are agentic, acknowledged, and empowered to continue to build communities and spaces.

Findings and Insight

Guided by the project aims to identify how lesbian people in Southampton conceptualised the location of, and opportunities to build, their community and what cultural, spatial resources were needed to support this, we examined the common themes in the responses collected on the maps, in notes made by workshop facilitators on the discussion, and in interviews with project partners. From this diverse set of data, we were able to offer insights into the successes and challenges of curating space for lesbian people in Southampton, and the multi-faceted experience of the city for this group.

Our method offers unique insights into the challenges of planning for cultural spaces and the complexity of engagement with space, especially as it intersects with perceptions of safety. In summary, collaborative participatory mapping bridges the gap between time-limited data capture in one-to-one interviews or focus groups, and ethnography, to offer an enhanced insight into the culture of a group of people, the pattern of their movement, and practices. Despite the advantages of ethnographies, they are typically conducted over several
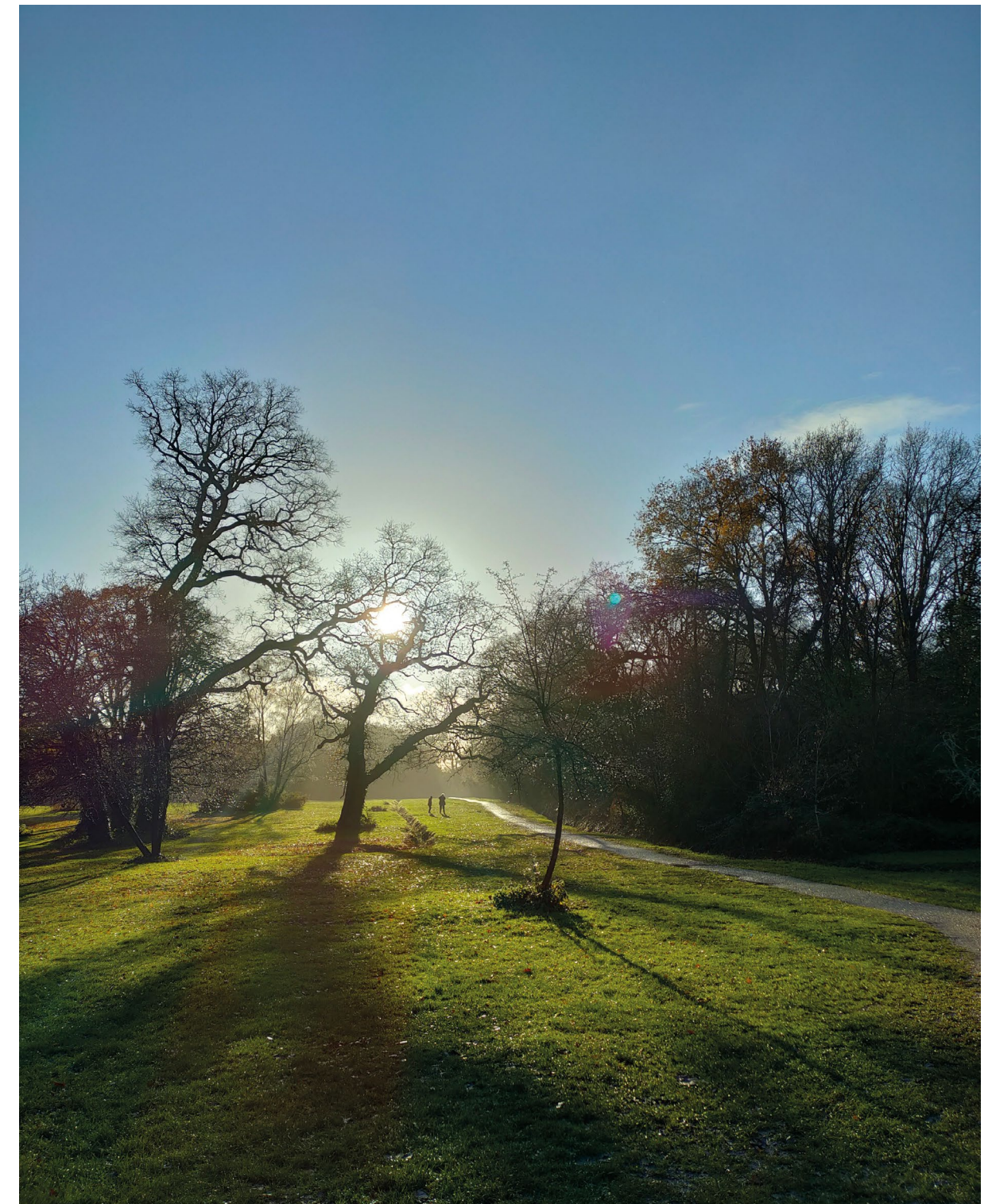
months or even years and require considerable financial resources to support a researcher or researchers to become embedded with the group being studied, and they produce large quantities of detailed data which takes many months to interpret and synthesise (Tomaszewski, 2020). By contrast, our method requires relatively few hours from facilitators or researchers (see table 1) to capture detailed but coherent data which (through the crafting of prompts) can focus on a single space, group event or time period, or it can be expanded (as we did) to understand a broader set of practices and use of space over time for a specified group. This method also offers an advantage over focus groups which allow for useful insight into group process and decision making but can become detached from concrete spaces given their usual focus on verbal discussion. Focus groups can also tend towards producing 'single narratives' as participants strive to acknowledge and endorse one another's experiences or concede to dominant voices in discussion (Smithson, 2000). Our method supplements verbal discussion typical in focus groups with annotation of a map allowing for a multiplicity of experience to be acknowledged and the value of minority perspectives to be visualised on the map (with 'outlying' sticky notes as important as those piled on top of others), even while dominant voices are speaking.

Safety is active and iterative

Urban environments are often assumed to offer greater safety for sexual minority groups, with relative anonymity in large populations and more dedicated cultural and social spaces (Browne, 2008; Rooke, 2007). In our study we found this was not straightforwardly the case; a range of evaluations of safety were undertaken resulting in participants sometimes using spaces which they felt were unsafe or less safe, as well as claiming spaces as safer which were not exclusively for LGBTQ+ people, compared to those which were. Southampton's small size and limited range of venues seemed to be a factor in prompting people to engage with spaces they felt were not consistently 'safe'. For example, during mapping participants discussed the city's gay-owned LGBTQ+ pub and club. A handful of participants described it as attracting heterosexual stag and hen parties resulting in what they termed an 'aggressive' and 'violent' atmosphere and acting as a lightning rod for people wishing to target LGBTQ+ people for violence and harassment. These subjective experiences of fear, discomfort and marginalisation in ostensibly LGBTQ+ friendly venues became the dominant account of what these spaces meant, with participants who had previously had positive experiences there (and recorded these on the map) deferring to the emotive accounts of those who had had negative experiences, asking where the injured parties would instead recommend going to socialise. We also heard, in expert interviews, how community group organiser's negative experiences of such venues prompted them to negotiate pro-

tected access to venues in the city which had not historically identified themselves as LGBTQ+ friendly. In discussion groups, a number of participants placed stickers on the map flagging these new venues as 'safe' or 'friendly'. Thus, the degree to which venues become designated as 'safe' or 'community focused' is primarily a consequence of the knowledge shared about them and subjective experience of repeated belonging and community intimacies. Provisioning spaces to support subcultural practices and provide resources for minoritised groups is, therefore, an active and iterative process in which group members must be actively engaged in the making and remaking of a space as a suitable, safe, and welcoming location.

When working with underutilised spaces these responses offer insight into how the experiences of a handful of individuals feeling threatened or unwelcome may be translated into wider subcultural knowledge of a space, while the cause of a space failing to engage a population remains invisible to out-group members. When considering strategies to establish and advertise new spaces for culture, collaborative participatory mapping can provide staging for discussions about intention and experience which are then shared between participants and subsequently shared with members of the wider target population.

Cultural space is everywhere

The material and textural method of this project was central to understanding the

experiences and knowledge of participants. Participants were able to layer their sticky notes, indicate their experiences took place outside the general boundaries of the city centre by placing their notes on the edge or even off the map, and were free to deface or rename the map to better represent their affective ties to places. This created 'hot spots' (see Figure 2) in the city which helped us understand how participants saw their social and cultural life clustering in certain areas, it also illuminated how diverse the spaces are which are entwinned in the cultural life of the city. For example, participants attributed equal significance to venues which had hosted Pride parties and to parks where they had spent summer afternoons with their partners. Participants told us how arguments in furniture stores with their partners had contributed to their sense of being 'at home' in Southampton, with the practicalities of homemaking as a lesbian couple accommodated in the city's commercial spaces. These experiences were no less significant

Fig. 2. A 'hot spot' of sticky notes on one area of the city

than highly visible and clearly classified LGBTQ+ cultural events (such as the LGBTQ+ bar having a drag queen hosting entertainment night on a Thursday, or regular lesbian-community group socials hosted in a coffee shop) which participants also labelled as part of their city map. The mapping allowed us to capture a (literally) multi-layered picture of the cultural life of lesbian people in the city which did not impose a hierarchy on the type of culture or social opportunities recorded.

Understanding the tapestry of culture which constitutes life for any one group in a city is extremely challenging. Quantitative measures cannot distinguish between access to commercial space as a means to furnish a home and, for example, the experience of shopping for home furnishings as a rite of passage in stereotyped lesbian homemaking rituals (something participants in one discussion event reflected on at length and recorded on the map). Our method provides a way to visualise the complexity of cultural space and value every kind of experience across every kind of location by empowering target populations to determine what gets put on the map. Identifying 'hot spots' through mapping can allow providers of cultural, commercial and social space to connect and co-ordinate in their strategies to engage communities. Conversely, mapping allows areas of under-provision to be easily visualised and, as our project showed, may also make it possible to identify why cultural spaces underperform if they are iso-

lated from the less visible, but no less important, spaces used as populations weave a cultural tapestry of place.

Measures of success

Detailed discussion of findings from this project are available in our published research article (Reed et al, 2023) and as a summary of findings (Reed, Paddon and Wilkinson, 2022) which was shared with project partners and stakeholders. Through this summary of findings, we communicated our key recommendations for addressing key issues of access to space and developing trust between lesbian people and event organisers and businesses regarding safety. We received feedback from a number of stakeholders that they had implemented changes: these included a shift in language used (explicit labelling of who was welcome at events and in venues, inclusive language when addressing groups) and provision of lesbian-only support groups in addition to pre-existing general services.

Further, we were invited to share our project findings in a local community news site (Reed, 2022). Through this and postings on social media, we continued to engage community stakeholders in discussion about the value of culture as it is made and remade through spaces and events in the city. Our main project partner, the local community arts, performance, café, pantry and social space made the announcement they were closing in March 2024, following challenges in funding, volunteer-staffing,

and low footfall (George, 2024). Our project found that that the flexible, community-led space delivered on a range of cultural needs for the lesbian people we spoke with. Such closures indicate that community commitment to use spaces can only go so far and that sustained investment is needed to protect the assets which are an evidenced vital part of the mosaic of cultural life.

Transferability and replicability

Our method is highly transferable to different locations and prompts can be tailored to direct contributors to speak to key priorities or knowledge gaps. Our findings indicate the value of ensuring that any prompts are open-ended and allow participants to report on spaces and places of significance which may expand beyond a designated city boundary, and which invite contributions on all kinds of everyday and transient spaces.

The mapping activity itself is easily set up with simple low-tech materials and a flexible engagement which can include asynchronous contributions from additional contributors. However, there is a core need to ensure facilitators share relevant subcultural knowledge with contributors: as an in-group member, Reed was able to recognise the significance of certain spaces or activities referenced by contributors and solicit further information or celebrate their inclusion, thus realising the in-kind valuing of knowledge which is central to the participatory approach (Aldridge

2015). This type of feedback is essential in building trust and inviting disclosures from contributors. Community researchers from the group or groups being engaged would be a simple way to ensure this knowledge is in the room when using the maps.

A key value of the method is that it is easily replicated with different groups, allowing comparisons to be made across groups occupying the same geographical and social spaces to understand the layering of culture and identify the positive impacts of the availability of flexible cultural spaces that can be used by different groups. Measures for success in using this method should be determined by the stated aims of the investigation. This could include identifying why certain venues or spaces are underutilised, identifying where in a city initiatives for promoting community and culture should be targeted, or understanding how (and if) specific locations are used by groups.

Importantly, the events are a measure of success and outcome in themselves. Existing research clearly shows that experiencing community belonging produces positive health and wellbeing impacts. Collaborative participatory mapping activities creates space for people to share the everyday, cultural activities and knowledge which support the building of community ties and expand their own knowledge, connections and network during the workshop. In our workshops participants chose to swap numbers and recommendations

Conclusion

Our pilot underscores the critical need to move beyond traditional, often top-down approaches to understanding the cultural needs and experiences of minoritised groups. By centring the voices and lived experiences of lesbian people in Southampton, we demonstrate the limitations of existing data and the crucial role of participatory methodologies in capturing the nuances of everyday cultural practices. Participatory collaborative mapping provides a powerful tool for identifying significant cultural spaces and for fostering community building and empowering participants to share their knowledge and perspectives.

Our findings challenge the conventional understanding of "cultural space," revealing its multifaceted nature and highlighting the importance of considering diverse locations and experiences, from designated LGBTQ+ venues to parks, commercial spaces, and even domestic settings. Furthermore, the study emphasises the subjective and dynamic nature of safety and belonging, demonstrating how these factors are constantly negotiated and re-evaluated within the context of specific communities and social interactions.

This research has implications for urban planners, policymakers, and community organisations. By understanding the complex and often invisible ways in which cultural spaces are created and utilised by minoritised groups, we are empowered to develop more inclusive and responsive strategies for supporting community well-being, fostering social inclusion, and enhancing the cultural vibrancy of our cities.

Key takeaways:

○ Centring the voices of minoritised groups: Prioritise participatory methods that empower community members to share their lived experiences and perspectives beyond neat categorisations or metrics used in quantitative measures.

○ Redefining "cultural space": Acknowledge the diverse and multifaceted nature of cultural spaces, extending beyond traditional venues and encompassing a wide range of locations and experiences.

○ Understanding the importance of safety and belonging: Recognise that subjective experiences of safety and belonging are crucial factors in shaping the use of cultural spaces.

○ Fostering community engagement: Participatory methods not only act as a mechanism for data collection but also a means of building community, fostering dialogue, and empowering community members.

This research serves as a starting point for further investigation into the cultural needs and experiences of diverse communities across various urban contexts. By continuing to prioritise community engagement and embrace innovative methodologies, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic relationship between [sub]culture, space, and community.

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Unlocking the hidden, marginalised and particular:

Coventry Digital, civic participation, storytelling and scaling sustainable place-based archives

Coventry University

Unlocking the hidden, marginalised and particular: Coventry Digital, civic participation, storytelling and scaling sustainable place-based archives

Ben Kyneswood and Nick Henry

Abstract

We tell the story of Coventry University's Coventry Digital, a digital archive project inspired by Coventry UK City of Culture 2021. Reflecting the value of accessible culture, we outline how Coventry Digital has become a place-based vehicle for collaboration with communities and citizens, making local history and revealing local knowledge. Through the project we addressed knowledge production and data ethics, and how the project could become financially viable with academic impact. Through an equitable partnership between community, business and the University, we highlight commercial conversation to create and scale sustainable digital archives.

Digital Archives and UK Cities of Culture

Digital archives are collections of asset types – audio, text, moving and still image, 3D objects – which have been added to an online repository through processes including scanning, cataloguing and uploading, By making assets available and accessible through online processes, they offer searchable access to the 'data of cultural life', historical and contemporary. Strategic decisions can mean that digital archives act in an inclusive way by fore-grounding access and use to marginal and hidden community assets and narratives. Despite digital archives proliferating, access has not been made to all assets. Europeana (2020:20) suggests that in Europe 300 million objects have been digitised, representing 10% of Europe's cultural heritage in museums, whilst Gosling et al (2022) have estimated that 146 million digital assets are held by around 230 archives in the UK, a small percentage of the physical. Moreover, these counts of digital cultural objects are restricted to only those in cultural heritage organisations and do not reflect the everyday experience of users of commercial, community or private archives. For instance, Gosling et al (2022) does not include assets within commercial picture libraries such as MirrorPix, which has digitised around 1.5 million images from a library of over 200 million images (MirrorPix, 2025: n.p), or the British Newspaper Archive of over 88 million pages of UK newspapers (BNA, 2025: n.p). Nor do these counts explore the numerous smaller community archives across the country, such as Coventry's Hillfields History Group, which has 14,845 images on Flikr (HHG, 2025: n.p). As such, when we think about digital archives, we must consider all kinds of bodies from museums and galleries to businesses, community and private organisations.

A UK City of Culture is a designation given to a city in the United Kingdom for a period of one year. It is a title awarded by the UK's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) every four years and the winner hosts a year-long programme of cultural events and celebrations (Evaluating Coventry UK City of Culture 2021). Creating an archive for a UK City of Culture is not a requirement of DCMS, but as UK City of Culture 2021, Coventry followed Derry~Londonderry (2013) and Hull (2017) in creating an archive, called Coventry Digital. Each City of Culture has adopted a different approach to their digital archive. Derry~Londonderry chose to collect and hold data within the local authority. In 2017, a University of Hull archivist collaborated with the city of culture delivery organisation to collect data. Like Hull, Coventry University sought to collaborate with the delivery organisation to collect assets and stories generated throughout the year. The Coventry Digital approach involved starting with 2021 but then going backwards by situating UK City of Culture in its context through a public engagement programme that crowdsourced the stories and evidence of Coventry's local history, whilst presenting the University with an opportunity to explore archive sustainability and deliver research outputs.

Today, the Coventry Digital archive comprises about 70,000 assets (mostly images and videos) ranging from personal and organisational collections of Coventry citizens and community groups to material collected during the UK City of Culture year to 17,000 images provided by MirrorPix (the owners of the historical photograph collection of the Coventry Telegraph newspaper). Its contents regularly gain press coverage (BBC Online, BBC TV, BBC Online, BBC Online, Times, BBC Online) and it has uncovered assets such as the first ever known colour photograph of Coventry – a field of dandelions taken by JJ Ward in 1909, overleaf.

Why Digital Archives?

Digital archives are being re-evaluated because of their data, as well as preservation, potential. Because they sit on the Internet and in most cases do not require a subscription, they present an accessible way to engage in cultural heritage, including of a place, giving the public opportunities to explore and develop their understanding of their local roots, contextualise their local experiences and engage in critical debate about local heritage. This matters where diverse communities might feel excluded from official spaces such as formal archiving spaces, or where collection policies are limited and therefore reflect a dominant perspective of local heritage.

Researchers from a range of disciplines including historians, sociologists and data scientists have begun to explore how digital archives are used in the public sphere. Digital archives also have commercial value with, for example, The National Archive realising commercial revenue from licensing into genealogy companies and Reach PLC licensing into the publishing industry.

The first known colour photograph of Coventry: A Field of Dandelions in Earlsdon (1909) by JJ Ward, who travelled to Paris in 1908 to buy the colour (autochrome) plates from the Lumière Brothers themselves. The Ward archive is being digitised and catalogued by his great-granddaughter, Julie Hill, and is available on Coventry Digital.

As websites of the data of cultural life, digital archives are built using searchable software systems called Digital Asset Management Systems or DAMS. It is this functionality that makes them accessible. Behind this is the resource intensive process of making digital the physical analogue items, including photographs, documents and film that make up an archive. Given what digitisation involves, it is not a surprise that large numbers of archives in the UK are not digital. The National Archives is the national observatory and identifies 3,500 archives on its Discovery system, which connects users digitally to catalogues of information about physical and digital holdings in UK archives. Discovery holds around 37 million descriptions of available items in UK archives, but only 9 million digital assets (TNA, 2025: n.p). Digital is not default in the public archival sector, with the Local Government Association (2023) recently identifying substantial challenges for local archives in providing a digital offer (LGA, 2023: n.p).

Towards a National Collection (2024: 14) research has demonstrated that 'both the general public and researchers would highly value the creation of a UK digital collections infrastructure'. Thus, recent TNA Initiatives to support digital archiving such as Plugged in, Powered Up (2022) and Our Digital Century (2023) have been welcome, but reveal continuing issues such as the need to develop workforce skills, to increase capacity and to invest in infrastructure across the sector to meet the public's

high digital expectations. Recent evaluation has shown that 'Enthusiasm for the digital inclusion agenda is not supported by activity. There is evidence of a widening gap between best and worst preservation performers' (TNA, 2024a: n.p). Despite significant numbers of users of national digital systems, such as the TNA Discovery with nearly 340M requests in 2023 (TNA, 2024b: 51), Thomas and Moss (2019: 141) warn that smaller archives have 'contracted out their online public service', which has led to a 'significant decline' in visitors, yet – demonstrating digital appetite – an increase in subscriptions for genealogy companies. Indeed, Ancestry.com – a global family history repository of registers, documents and images – claims over 300 million subscribers with around 3 million subscribers in the UK. To access all 30 billion records Ancestry hold, a UK subscriber will pay £19.99 per month (Ancestry. co.uk: n.p). Ancestry is not the only digital archive subscription service, with other commercially successful offers including Adam Matthew, FindMyPast and the British Newspaper Archive.

Alongside these paid-for services evidencing the appetite for digital archive content there has been an increase of use of content in local history groups on social media such as Facebook (Gibbons, 2018). Indeed, the public's rapacity has led to what Hoskins (2017; 2023) flags as a new economy of knowledge – framed by participation, likes, shares, edits and artificial intelligence – breaking out of the archive

in a chaotic manner whereby 'the memory of the multitude is all over the place, scattered yet simultaneous and searchable: connected, networked, archived' (Hoskins, 2017: 86).

Whose digital archives? The (public) management of cultural data

'Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation' (Derrida, 1995: 4)

In developing Coventry Digital, and the crowdsourcing and public engagement model behind it, the 'collection and archiving' principles adopted by Coventry University have been also framed by social justice concerns (Derrida, 1995; Bastien, 2023). History is mediated and curated. There is a great need to recognise that the archive and the archivist are not neutral social actors. As Jimerson (2007: 253) notes, archivists do not just make archives available to the public, they 'contribute to a richer human experience of understanding and compassion. They can help to protect the rights of citizens and to hold public figures in government and business accountable for their actions'. This juxtaposition between archives and social justice is deeply historic. Derrida (1995: 2) describes how 'archive' is derived from the ancient Greek Archons, or magistrates, in whose private house public records were kept, and from whom permission for access was required. More recently, the concept of archive has

also widened. Foucault (1972) suggests archive is an abstract concept that goes beyond the walls of a building to involve any object that tells a cultural story. Thus, archive in this wider sense is imbued with questions about authority and the right to tell histories. Today, we can see this in the popularity of genealogy through the capability to curate one's digital family tree using licensed official documents (such censuses from the National Archive) alongside shared personal items (such as uploaded family photographs). These subscription models sit alongside free to view crowdsourced platforms such as the British Cultural Archive, Subcultures archive or Birmingham Music Archive, making archives today a broader concept.

Yet for most, archives are associated with organised physical and digital files held in buildings, much like museums and libraries. Though their role is a nuanced and complex one, archivists are seen as gatekeepers whose training reflects the social sciences and legal disciplines that the archival discipline came from (Duranti & Michetti, 2017: 76). As such, professional archivists use language to describe and organise their archive differently from how the public might, leading to different priorities about what to make available online, perhaps leaving treasured and valuable memories, and their data on the shelf. Similarly, the UK has not been a place that easily invites new arts and culture to take its place amongst the approved cultural heritage narratives, including at

the expense of the particular, the local/s, the quieter and the marginal(ised) (Hall, 1998).

Without genuine engagement and open practices from institutions and professionals to give everyday stories oxygen, communities generally lack the support and resources to consistently tell and control their own data and stories, whether in public archives, private homes or community settings. This matters – if communities don't tell their own stories, someone will tell them for them; and this is amplified with digital repositories. Within the 'data chaos', they can strategically obfuscate and elide as much as illuminate, focusing on dominant narratives to generate clicks, conversation and cash, and at the expense of the public (Thatcher & Dalton, 2022). The platform algorithms of Facebook organise data for maximum exposure; and such commercial decisions have social consequences.

Algorithms privilege coloniality (Ricuarte, 2019; Mohammed, 2020) by 'promoting' dominant narratives and eliding quieter, marginal or minority knowledge. As Amoore (2020) reminds us about developing algorithms, 'To decide whether to include or exclude a data input, or to weight one feature over another are not merely technical questions – they're also political propositions about what a society can and should be like'. (Amoore, 2020: n.p). Algorithms and artificial intelligence also need data – huge amounts of it; witness the UK today as the government currently con-

sults on artificial intelligence training and copyright. Whilst suggesting that a route must be found for copyright holders to reserve their rights, the government 'propose an exception to support use at scale of a wide range of material by AI developers where rights have not been reserved' (IPO, 2024: 2). This exemption for data mining means that those who are unaware of their rights may not be protected by the state, alongside those who have made their content and knowledge available copyright free. A public who are exploring their historic community and family local life may neither be aware of their rights nor the social and economic potential of their data.

The case for trusted local digital archive, like Coventry Digital, is therefore a case for helping the public understand that their knowledge has value, for co-creating trusted spaces which reflect the rich and detailed diversity of UK history, and for generating income locally, sustainably and ethically.

Coventry Digital

https://coventry.digital is a Digital Asset Management System which makes available to the public digital assets – videos, images, documents, 3D objects, sound – via search and curated galleries. Users are asked to share your city by contributing knowledge and assets and sharing them with the wider public. To date (January 2025), around 3,750 people have registered on Coventry Digital, generating over 450,000 individual impressions by shar-

ing assets into social media and on their own websites, averaging over 450 per day since January 2023. Registration is used to avoid web bots mining the website and enables us to remain in touch with users and assure copyright holders.

Critical to digital archives like Coventry Digital is the ability for them to be searchable – via the metadata associated with each asset. Metadata is 'data about data'. Metadata is descriptive data that helps people to find, understand, authenticate, trust, use and manage information and records. If information and records have metadata, we know what it is, what it has been used for, and how to use it. Metadata also makes information and records easier to find. There are different types of metadata related to the purpose of records in an archive; for Coventry Digital key metadata has included elements such as the location of the subject, names, places, dates and a caption to describe what the user is looking at.

Quality metadata ensures that an asset is more discoverable through searching for terms, making it a key component for the social and economic value of the asset. Without metadata, the asset cannot be seen and used by humans or systems. Even limited metadata restricts discovery for the public, constraining how that asset (e.g. picture) might be used for a topic (building, place, time, etc.). Because it controls detection, metadata is an opportunity to think critically about how access is given: who might want to search using what

terms; who has access; and what they will use the asset for (researching history, a theatre prop or a brand launch?). An approach that privileges public use and social justice adopts the view that metadata should reflect the value to society rather than value as a limited commodity alone (Gitelman, 2023).

Carroll et al (2020) argue that digital archive practices should be based on the Care and Fair principles of digital data management, which prioritises 'Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics' (Carroll et al, 2020: 1). This approach recognises that data comes from individuals who should be granted the right to make decisions about their data – such as those who have been asked to share your city by Coventry Digital – and is something that is easily forgotten as data are collected into anonymised datasets. As Loukissas (2021) neatly puts it, we need to acknowledge the 'data setting and not just the data set' (Loukissas, 2021: 2). That is, recognise how data comes from and can be retraced back to us as people in our localities, and that data, like us, are partial, often unclear and requires close and repeat interpretation. By engaging the public in these debates, we connect people to their data and its interpretation, which offers them insight into the social and economic value of (their) data.

In a model akin to citizen scientists, participation in Coventry Digital can involve uploading assets and metadata from your home; but to further support people to

Coventry Sketchbook project (2021). Top: Marcos Sevilla Martin. Above left and right: Ywei Liu. Right: Alice Goodman.
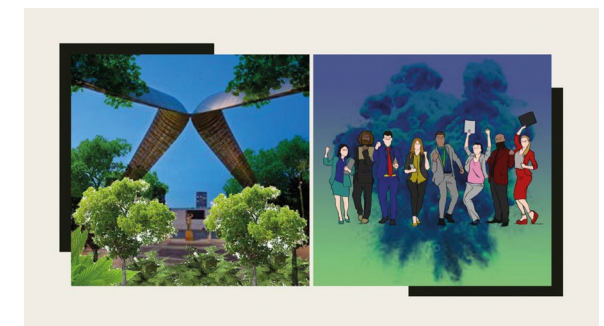
Coventry Sketchbook project (2021). Will Hughes.

contribute, workshops provide a chance to discuss issues alongside giving access to professional digitisation equipment at Coventry University during the week and at the Coventry Archives organisation at weekends. Workshops enable contributors to add their own assets that tell their story, but also to work with the Coventry Digital team to strategically identify important collections and add new metadata to existing ones. And this model has been particularly useful where public debate is needed to identify features in a photograph; for instance, where a street needs identifying and local knowledge has come to the fore.

The organic growth of 400,000 impressions from sharing assets into the community shows how Coventry Digital uses existing local knowledge systems (contributors and their knowledge of metadata) alongside the Coventry Digital website to evidence public debates about local knowledge, for instance on the www.historiccoventryforum. co.uk. In this sense, the digital archive acts as a lending library. Though Coventry Digital is a Coventry University initiative, the University makes no claim of copyright for the content, working in partnership with contributors to realise the potential of individual archives, whether a family collection, community or organisation, and so acts as a Content Management Organisation (CMO), much like organisations that sell and licence images, such as Getty.

Coventry Digital's SmartFrames technology enables the public to enjoy a high-reso-

lution file that is revisable – as we collaborate with contributors and users, we revise the metadata (description of the asset) and all SmartFrames impressions on other websites or socials also update. Assets are shared using the embed links of the SmartFrames technology without giving full access to the asset. This method protects copyright holders by ensuring that copyright assets remain within the Coventry Digital eco-system, but allows the asset to appear on other websites, emails and socials. Aligned with the CARE principles, through Coventry Digital the asset owner retains authority, assured that it is their approved metadata associated with the asset. Using embedding also ensures only one copy is online, saving so-called 'digital litter' of many file copies. The system can also licence assets and show advertising.

Building Coventry Digital's Assets

The following showcases four projects which have become part of Coventry Digital.

The Coventry Sketchbook project (2020) made sketchbooks available to the public and asked them to illustrate their relationship with Coventry. After Covid in 2022, over 5,000 sketches from around 150 artists were digitised. As a dataset, they reflect themes that affected public life at the time, offering insight into how creative practice became an outlet for recording the impact of Covid. Style is personalised, and we see an individual's priorities, with nature, family, friends and the city space giv-

en attention in a curated sequence using a variety of artistic techniques, from collage, pencil sketch and photography. These types of terms formed the base metadata for the materials and to support searchability across the sketchbooks.

In line with the CARE principles, and so that the artists/contributors remain connected to the public presentation of their work and to any future uses of the assets, we worked closely with the contributors to create further descriptive text (deeper metadata), ensuring the sensitivities of their biography and explaining the artist's approach to storytelling.

In another project, Nitin Sawhney was commissioned by the Coventry City of Culture Trust to create music for Coventry Cathedral as a response to Benjamin Brittan's War Requiem of 1962. The performance was illuminated by projections of Coventry's diverse population by artist Mark Murphy, using images from Coventry Digital.

The City of Culture Trust delivery team made assumptions that assets would be free for the artist to use. However, for such projects, and where copyright holders approve use, revenue should be generated for copyright holders. In this instance we negotiated payment for use in the Cathedral for two archives, Jason Scott Tilley's and John Blakemore's Coventry photographs, and then a secondary fee for use on BBC television. We did not take an agent fee as Coventry Digital had not been set up

as a revenue generating business within the University. However, the project did demonstrate how local photography has resale value.

Arthur Cooper was a press photographer operating in Coventry between 1940 and 1965, working mostly for the Midland Daily News and Coventry Evening Telegraph. In the Arthur Cooper project, local volunteers added granular local knowledge (metadata) to nearly 10,000 photographic glass negatives of post-war Coventry, which belong to major publisher Reach PLC as part of their MirrorPix archive of UK news photojournalism. The MirrorPix business model is to digitise assets requested by publishers, usually historical figures. The Arthur Cooper project was different. The images were of the city life of ordinary people made famous for a day, alongside a few famous faces. MirrorPix were interested in stepping beyond the basic metadata of names, dates and places that might lead them to the corresponding article in the Coventry Telegraph or Midland Daily News. They wanted to understand why these photographs energise community conversations about the city space, bringing new audiences to their content.

About 40 contributors worked on a shared spreadsheet to annotate the assets, with groups focused on their area of interest, whether sport, families, social or city life. In the first three months over 60% of the assets were annotated. Thanks to the contributor metadata, the MirrorPix assets become discoverable and available for free,

Coventry Digital images projected by Mark Murphy for Ghost in the Ruins, 29 January 2022, © FiveSix Photography.

shared online as 'spatial images' of local history (Hawlbachs, 1951: 2). Alongside social value by connecting local people, these assets can be associated with the corresponding newspaper article, making them economically valuable. In line with the CARE and FAIR principles, we have begun to actively discuss what remuneration and comfort might look like for metadata contributors, and what the mechanism for decision making about use cases might look like when we consider licensing datasets (such as for AI or genealogy) alongside single assets (for publishing).

The fourth project, Walking Through Coventry Data, worked with Coventry City Council Officers, Coventry's Poet Laureate, Emilie Lauren Jones, local creative producers and Coventry Digital. Council data on Coventry, together with images and videos from Coventry Digital, were 'surround' displayed on the gallery walls and floors at The Reel Store (now closed) to both illustrate the types of city data available and provide a new way of understanding the city through a gently immersive experience. This has since been transformed into a VR experience.

Moving forward

Our ambition is to build on these and other projects to explore what is possible with our business partners and communities by developing an approach that generates social and economic value, and a sustainable digital archive model, for all contributors. This is in the face of the current inexorable

decline in public funding and investment for cultural activity, and in particular archives, especially at a beleaguered local level, and yet where the value of place-based and personal data is possibly as great as ever (Madgin and Howcroft, 2024). The lessons from the earlier projects point to some ways forward, as does the regulatory environment, but navigating these is complex. We have continued development with research into the value of Coventry Digital via a survey of over 500 users and interviews with key collaborators. These findings point to the need to enhance how Coventry Digital makes content available with blogs, features and community collaborations, alongside ensuring that existing assets have enhanced metadata to make them more discoverable and therefore relevant. Respondents were also keen for assets to be portable, and licensed into other platforms they used, including genealogy sites such as Ancestry.com so they can link images to family trees. They know the value of their local knowledge as metadata but don't necessarily want remuneration. Instead, they want to see investment in digitisation and use cases, in other words, increased breadth and depth of accessibility to cultural assets. Business partners – platform software, digitisation equipment and services, and asset holders – want speed and scale so that alongside making a non-commercial public offer, assets can be licensed into and the potential for new markets, including licensing into genealogy, publishing and training artificial intelligence. In particular, the national scale

of the MirrorPix local newspaper photographic collection, covering around 50 UK locations, including Coventry, through 200 million images, is an opportunity to scale our approach to local digital archives nationally and drive income from those wanting individual assets such as publishers and genealogy companies and those needing credible datasets such as those seeking to train AI. Joint bid development is underway with these partners to generate R&D investment funds.

If strategic digitisation and enhanced metadata creates social and economic value (Gitelman, 2023), as we discovered with the Arthur Cooper project, but adding metadata is a slow, costly manual process, to make our project viable requires developing a workflow that can add metadata faster and deploy assets cleanly into the public sphere and to business partners. Such a workflow relies on moderation by local knowledge volunteers, and so to scale the project we need to rethink how their time might be better used. Other projects (Zooniverse, From the Page, Crowd Heritage) have sought to increase the crowd size to increase scale, but with volunteer attrition and recruitment a constant demand. We are exploring an approach that will enhance volunteer experience by moderating artificial intelligence outputs, including keywording, geo-location and generated captions. Using our existing digitisation software workflow, our aim is to add series of computer vision AI modules that will classify large numbers of digitised assets

with keywords for review. The classifications will enable the system to apportion assets to the correct volunteer interests. During training we anticipate volunteers will create metadata captions based on their knowledge of assets presented to them, but they will be ultimately moderating AI outputs. This means fewer people can review more assets, amending and authorising metadata from which the AI will continue to learn. To accelerate the AI learning, we will use the MirrorPix local newspaper image archive as the training dataset, working in specific local areas, and by working chronologically, we can connect assets to their corresponding article on the British Newspaper archive, giving the AI more granular data from which to learn, and integrating local knowledge with published articles. Once trained, the AI will be strategically used on other localarchives whilst the AI parameters and weightings can in principle be deployed in the other 50 locations where MirrorPix has an archive.

The ambition is to challenge how archives are created, managed and used in the UK by bringing the public into the workspace, enabling action around decolonisation and knowledge economies. By creating a series of connected UK local archives, like Coventry Digital, it is also a vision of a dataset based on the initial 200M MirrorPix images, augmented with local archival contributions and perhaps other national collections, which together create a sustainable national dataset of significant value, re-

covering cost for the system, remunerating contributors by licensing into other platforms and delivering social value through a free to use dedicated local platform designed for social sharing and debate. Already part of multi-disciplinary research at Coventry University, a sustainable platform offers further research, learning and civic engagement opportunities.

Furthermore, we write at a moment of national ferment for (cultural) data sets, including their pivotal position in AI. The UK government is seeking to position the UK as a global artificial intelligence leader and recognise that AI needs training on high quality data. A National Data Library will make 'available high-potential data sets for partnered companies' (DSTI, 2025: n.p) and a strategic plan will be published in Summer 2025, exploring how public data are to be made available alongside a focus on strategic data collection, including a recommendation to 'Actively incentivise and reward researchers and industry to curate and unlock private data sets' (ibid). Meanwhile, the current UK government consultation on copyright and AI is seen as a potential existential threat to creative and cultural producers with its potential recommendation of copyright exemption for AI companies to data mine without remuneration where rights are not asserted digitally. Data mining will be a concern for asset owners who have not enforced their rights, for collections with orphan assets (TNA, 2021) where copyright ownership is acknowledged but unclear, disputed or

currently untraced, and for those beginning to engage with their archive and its digital social and economic value, which includes communities and families but also smaller archives.

For local people and local archives, the speed of change is a challenge to their ability to assert their rights and authority over their assets and local narratives, and to how they continue to challenge limited conceptions of archives which often deny marginal, quiet or diverse voices. Our position is that this is their city, this is their data, and these are their stories. Coventry Digital has sought to connect local people to major archives, which has led to local wins for both parties and promising future collaboration with potentially sustainable benefits. Communities can offer valuable place-shaping insight through their willingness to debate local concerns and connect their family and local history in the digital spaces they use. Without trusted platforms and partners, that promise is made harder and they may not see the economic benefits alongside the social ones.

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Unlocking meanwhile spaces: the case for a regional approach

Southampton Institute of Arts and Humanities and Countryside and Community Research Institute

Unlocking meanwhile spaces: the case for a regional approach

Nicky Marsh and Daniel Keech

Introduction – Coming together through cultural use of local 'meanwhile' spaces

Research has been taking place in the University of Southampton's Institute for Arts and Humanities (SIAH) and in the University of Gloucestershire's Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) for the past four years to develop new approaches for understanding the relationship between culture and place-shaping. We have explored how hyperlocal data can capture people's feelings about place, can influence place-shaping policies, and can push the boundaries of how cultural investment is assessed, especially where this seeks to understand longer-term local outcomes.

This article shares an overview of our findings and suggests how culture could reinvigorate town centres and adapt to current challenges of the urban public realm. The impact of culture on place-shaping is very broad, covering support for cultural industries, the positioning of cultural 'quarters' and discussions about the function of the creative arts in urban regeneration. Here, we take the specific example of 'meanwhile space' – the temporary repurposing of vacant high street retail spaces or town centre public areas – as a model for thinking about how to devise, sustain and evaluate culture in towns and small cities in new

ways. When innovation in meanwhile cultural uses is shared, examined, compared and refined, we believe that places can become better, inter-connected and more creative in several ways.

Shared interests between a number of recent SIAH and CCRI projects establishes a framework, set out below, for considering a new approach for developing cultural meanwhile spaces in towns and cities.

(i) Pride in place

The first shared interest concerns the need to develop a better account of the wider benefits and opportunities of culture in relation to place-shaping, particularly given the continued political interest in 'pride in place'[1]. Our projects have sought to understand what pride in place means for the culture of local communities, beyond gathering quantitative records of assumptions of pride through proxy data, such as what kinds of people are turning up to cultural events.[2] We have called for a better understanding of what cultural investment, as a way to stimulate feelings of pride in place, can – and can't – be assumed to do, particularly in terms of civic engagement.

(ii) Scale matters

The second shared interest is a focus on the particular needs of towns and small cities. We want to explore the needs of the kinds of places that are well represented by the Key Cities network, but are less well-represented by current approaches to culture-led regeneration, or that are not earmarked as cultural pioneers. We have, for example, been interested in places such as the Arts Council England's (ACE) priority places or the towns specifically identified by the Levelling Up agenda. Circumstances in some of these places contrast to approaches linked to Richard Florida's now much-critiqued idea of the 'Creative City' (Florida 2005), or to the effects of flagship cultural interventions, such as the City of Culture or the relocation of national venues outside the metropole. Less attention has been paid to narrower scales of place and culture, including country and market towns.

(iii) Applied research and collaborative learning

Lastly, the third shared commitment is to the notion that universities and researchers can support their complex local civic and community networks and business sectors involved in delivering and sustaining cultural changes. We know that the promise of meeting the needs of under-served communities through culture is an attractive but risky one and that achieving it requires committed structures of co-production and care. In this article, we are interested in articulating the role that the civic commitments of universities can play in these conversations.

Our article draws together the connections, and emerging conclusions, from our parallel projects in order to suggest a new kind of intervention in our high streets. We propose, via the topic of creative meanwhile use, the development of a conceptual frame that can advance from gathering case studies and tool kits to building systematic improvements to cultural place-shaping and bolster civic cultural leadership. Collaborations are required across the private, public and third sectors that can devise solutions to the practical and technical problems that communities face in developing cultural initiatives.

Culture and place-shaping

In this section, we present recent work from SIAH and CCRI that emphasises the potential of extending the regeneration associated with cultural investment towards more intangible outcomes such as citizenship and place connection.

(i) SIAH: 'And Towns' projects

Three recent 'And Towns' SIAH projects, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), have explored

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1 Pride in Place was one of the 12 'missions' of the Conservative Government's (2019-2024) Levelling Up Manifesto: Statement of Levelling Up Missions. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statement-of-levelling-up-missions/statement-of-levelling-up-missions, last accessed 4 February 2024

2 There is also a body of quantitative research that highlights the pride feel in their green spaces, communities, high streets, heritage and cultural assets. Heritage and Pride in Place, Heritage Counts, Historic England. https://historicengland.org.uk/research/heritage-counts/heritage-and-society/pride-in-place/#ref10, last accessed 4 February 2024

how local residents sought to use culture to shore up the recovery of communities in the post-Covid and post-austerity periods. The first, 'Towns and the Cultural Economies of Recovery', was an AHRC 'Where Next?' scoping project.[3] In it we worked with local communities and expert partners (including ACE, Historic England, NESTA[4]) to understand the role that culture and heritage played in local authorities' responses to bidding to the UK Government's 'Towns Fund'[5]. We combined the disciplinary approaches of researchers working across arts, humanities and the social sciences to understand how towns used, deployed and imagined culture as a strategy for social and economic place-shaping. Our conclusions stressed the importance of hyper-local experience of culture and the role of emotional governance and affect in place-shaping and attachment, particularly the importance of narratives and around pride and self-perception. We also identified a number of gaps in existing approaches, specifically the need for more innovative and longitudinal research around culture's broader spillover effects in place and the need to understand the complex heterogeneity of towns and small cities, particularly their different models of regional inter-

connectivity and relationship to national strategies and anchor organisation. Our research on the constitution of the Towns Funds boards also revealed the narrow demographic of cultural decision makers and indicated the need for more inclusive and creative aware models of community consultation. Above all, of course, the research also related the effects of austerity on local authorities' ability to plan and implement cultural programmes (including research, bidding and evaluative capacities).

Our subsequent And Towns projects focused on some of the issues and gaps raised by this report and identified the kinds of methodologies that could be used as part of a more inclusive framework for place-based cultural decision making. The first of these, 'Feeling Towns', was part of the AHRC Place Programme, and successfully trialled place-based methods to understanding pride in towns across England. The project revealed the discrepancies between quantitative desk-based approaches to pride (such as the 'experimental metrics' of the Levelling Up agenda that sought to use proxies such as crime and home ownership data to measure pride) and qualitative place-based approaches[6]. We co-produced a creative methods 'think kit' that allowed participants to express feelings and ideas about pride in place that were

not easily put into words and facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' distinctive experiences of place and the relationship between place and place attachment. We discovered that pride can be hyperlocal and that geographical parameters and distinctions (boundaries between ward and city-wide strategies) did not adequately capture the complex specificity of people's experiences. We also discovered that pride is reciprocal and relational, that communities measure themselves in relation to other communities and that both being 'seen' by others, and having agency in a place, are key to experiencing pride. From this we started to unearth the difficult negative correlations of pride, the

risk of shame that a relational affect relies upon, and the sense of trauma experienced by communities who have lost key cultural assets and experience a diminishing sense of agency toward place. (Howcroft, Marsh and Owen, 2024)

In a second, follow-up project, Neighbouring Data, we explored how a range of qualitative data forms about place could be mobilised to support more inclusive and informed place-based cultural decision-making frameworks[7]. We conducted a series of interviews, focus groups and workshops with both qualitative data us-

3 Towns and the Cultural Economies of Recovery, AndTowns. https://andtowns.co.uk/project/towns-and-the-cultural-economies-of-recovery/
4 NESTA is a British social innovation think-tank. www.nesta.org.uk
5 Towns Fund prospectus. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/towns-fund-prospectus

6 AndTowns: https://andtowns.co.uk/ and University of Glasgow Place-Based Research Programme: https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/research-projects/place-based-research-programme/

7 And Towns: Neighbouring Data. https://andtowns.co.uk/project/neighbouring-data/

ers (local authorities, cultural groups, BIDs) and with data observatory architects and creative practitioners to understand the histories, models and theoretical potentials of data observatories to use creative and qualitative data. We discovered that social media, and a renewed focus on consultation, meant that local authorities and cultural partners often possessed a surfeit of qualitative data – what one interviewee described as a 'big bang' of qualitative information – but that they lacked the methodologies, structures and capacities to ensure that it was comprehensive, rigorous and inclusive. We worked with them and with computer scientists to develop an initial architecture for a qualitative data observatory that could meet local and place-based needs and develop agency in place through meaningful, reciprocal and sustainable decision making[8].

(ii) CCRI high streets research

In 2023, CCRI was commissioned by ACE and Gloucester City Council to consider how intangible pride of place could be evaluated. This followed an extensive survey in 2022 by UoG's business school which, alongside results from focus groups, revealed somewhat mixed public perceptions of Gloucester's town centre. In particular, opinion was honed on the pedestrian shopping zone of the 'the Gates' named after the crossing medieval streets that once lead from the city's guarded East, West,

North and South Gates to the city centre. While people celebrated Gloucester's sense of community cohesion and felt hopeful about how the city would respond to future investment, feedback also revealed anxiety over the cost of living, a deterioration in the physical state and crime-related safety of the city.

CCRI carried out three workshops. The first sought to understand how the impacts of cultural investment were measured by public and private cultural funders. The second reviewed how cultural impact have been thought about in recent cultural initiatives including several City of Culture applications and following the post-COVID cultural investments directed at Gloucester's regional neighbour, Bristol. The final workshop proposed to adapt and simplify early stages of Social Return on Investment evaluation with key city centre and community representatives.

Finally, in 2024, CCRI's recent report on cultural uses of meanwhile space (Keech et al. 2024) highlights a range of good practice, including the transfer of public assets to arts networks (especially ACE national portfolio organisations), evidence of supportive and facilitative local authorities and the growing importance of universities as 'producers' of arts and artists and as managers of cultural assets. As a result of this work, we recognised that the potential of meanwhile cultural use remains a fragile and complex arena for creative innovators. Particular difficulties include the need to secure low-cost spaces while

ensuring enough income to maintain basic services and security, protect the fabric of buildings, navigate the legal technicalities of temporary tenancies, and the lack of capacity (despite supportive policies) of come city authorities. Interactions with business networks remain underexplored. A framework for improving meanwhile potentials is clearly needed.

The trouble with high streets

There is a need, as our published work shows, to support well-evidenced community development and local understandings of place where this is linked to understanding of the effects of cultural interventions. Much of the existing literature in the field has focused on large-scale flagship projects (e.g. Cities of Culture) or the peripheral repositioning of international cultural assets (Harris and Williams 2011; Ward 2018; Plaza 2008).

The literature evaluating these interventions has demonstrated that although they are often celebrated, by both the press and by their policy architects, that their outcomes risk being either short-term or insufficiently targeted to the specifics needs of local communities. Such initiatives are consequently increasingly understood as a form of cultural spectacle, and associated with entrepreneurial and neo-liberal approaches to urban regeneration, and fail to adequately meet the needs of under-served local communities in particular. In addition, cities must give account of themselves as somehow failing, post-in-

dustrial, not-cultural places to qualify for (or deserve) cultural investment (Bianchini 2006; Bianchini et al 1992; Boyle 1997; Tommarchi and Bianchini 2022). The success that these initiatives do have, in changing external attitudes and narratives toward a place, has led to their roll out as 'models', often supported by consultant-led branding, in ways that risk being inadequately sensitive to the specific histories, economies and needs of differentiated places.

The decline of the high street has a very specific role within debates about culture and place. Accelerated by the effects of the Covid crisis, high streets have long been a subject of national concern which continue to be highlighted within high-profile interventions (Portas 2011; Grimsey 2013; Dobson 2015; Timpson 2019; Shaw et al 2022).[9] Although recommendations for reviving retail is included in high street reviews the awareness of the need for a multi-capital approach – to augment retail with mixed use and community-focused services and to understand the nature of place – also runs throughout the policy literature. Mary Portas, for example, suggested that if we 'invest in and create social capital in the heart of our communities…economic capital will follow' and she stresses the importance of markets and market days along

8 And Towns: Policy and Practice. https://and-towns.co.uk/output/policy-and-practice/

9 House of Lords Built Environment Committee.
High Streets: Life beyond retail? https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldbuiltenv/42/4202.htm

with a concern with the impact of absentee landlords[10]. Two years after the Portas Review, Bill Grimsey advocated for high streets that could offer a 'networked community hub incorporating health, housing, education, arts, entertainment, business/office space, manufacturing and leisure... as well as retail'[11]. Grimsey focused closely on the importance of leadership, on possibilities of local and micro finance, and on reducing business rates. Three years after Grimsey, John Timpson's 'The High Street Report', from which the High Streets Task Force emerged, highlighted the need for local leadership, vision and on 'building local capacity' (Timpson 2018). The report advocated for the importance of cross-sectoral leadership and for a national task force that could share best practice – data, networks, skills, and expertise – to support and enable leadership. Timpson also focused on the reuse of empty properties, suggesting that 'local authorities should use their initiative to encourage landlords and tenants to think innovatively' and that 'special terms should be offered to community businesses or other traders with social purpose' and was supportive of the idea of piloting an '"Open Doors" brokerage' that could match 'landlords of empty properties with community groups looking for space' (Timpson 2018).

This emphasis on social capital, and on the creative repurposing of empty spaces for community use, was retained in the Government's Levelling Up agenda of 2021-2024, which sought to rebalance regional socio-economic disparity, especially between the north and the south of the country, as well as within regions. Cultural investment was one of the key themes of the Levelling Up Prospectus and 'creative repurposing' was a central lever for high street as local authorities were urged to consider 'creatively repurposing museums, galleries, visitor attractions (and associated green spaces) and heritage assets as well as creating new community-owned spaces to support the arts and serve as cultural spaces'[12]. This was supported by Andy Haldane, Chair of Levelling Up Advisory Council, who shared authorship with then Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove over many of its key documents and made social capital key to this agenda[13]. This question has been taken up more recently in work on social and cultural infrastructures which similarly elaborates the need for 'community spaces where people come together into the wider context of the places where people live' and that 'Social infrastructure is not limited to public assets designed for that purpose; it can be any public, private or community-owned

space that is of value to local people'[14]. The role that the private sector can play in providing these social infrastructures and community places, in both planned and unplanned ways, has itself become the recent subject of research by the Bennet Institute[15].

Meanwhile use – good practice or a big headache?

Meanwhile space has emerged as a response to what Alex Madanipour (2018) describes an intrinsic 'supply-side inefficiency' of the commercial property market, especially when vacant availability tips into a persistent emptiness that causes devaluation in property and a pervading sense of social and economic decline. These spaces have emerged due to a general move among consumers towards online shopping which has brought savings to businesses keen to avoid the prestige rents of high street premises through an expansion of mail-order. In the UK, on-line sales grew by 47% during the pandemic and, while now rebalancing, are still increasing overall[16].

The idea of the meanwhile space became common in post-austerity UK cultural landscape. Initially identified with a place-specific arts practice – 'we take a local environment, subvert it and respond to it' – the reuse of vacant properties through pop-up and meanwhile spaces was seized upon by corporations as well as local communities[17]. The risks of speculative forms of gentrification were particularly acute in the context of the accelerating inequality and precarity of urban property markets. As Mara Ferreri has shown, the '"pop-up revolution" of 2010" established itself 'through interesting and culturally specific associations with community-oriented practices' but has since become 'increasingly entangled with dominant logics of urban development.' (Ferreri 2021, p.11). Ferreri's longitudinal account of 'temporary urbanism', specifically in East London and the site of the 2012 Olympics, argues against the 'memoryless festivalisation of place and utopias of project-based connectivity' and retains only a faint optimism for the reclaiming of spaces that can allow for grounded engagement rather than the 'celebrated glamorisation of ephemerality' (Ferreri 2021, p.167).

Cities and towns have nonetheless continued to advocate for meanwhile use as a route that can mobilise the value of culture (Ennis and Douglass 2011; De Graaf 2023;

10 The Portas review: the future of our high streets. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-portas-review-the-future-of-our-high-streets
11 Welcome to The Vanishing Highstreet. http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/

12 Levelling Up Fund: prospectus. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-fund-prospectus
13 Counting the cost of bowling alone, RSA CEO Lecture 2025. https://www.thersa.org/articles/blog/counting-the-cost-of-bowling-alone/

14 Social and Cultural Infrastructure, The British Academy. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/social-infrastructure/
15 The role of the private sector in the provision of social infrastructure, Bennett Institute for Public Policy. https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/research/research-projects/the-role-of-the-private-sector-in-the-provision-of-social-infrastructure/
16 https://www.statista.com/topics/2333/e-commerce-in-the-united-kingdom/#topicOverview accessed 31st January

2025.
17 'Up, up and away; Pop-ups, how an alternative trend went mainstream', The Economist, 397.8707 (Nov 6, 2010): 40.

Zhou et al. 2017). We foresee a bridge between twentieth century visions of retail and new forms of grounded engagement that re-occupying spaces might offer. This requires careful and collaborative handling, rooted in thinking about the role of culture and community-needs in shaping places. Whatever happens in a meanwhile space may be temporary but such activities can contribute to shared community and civic inspiration about how places are represented, articulated, celebrated and – importantly – who has a voice in how they continue to change. As such, cultural meanwhile use can be an intrinsic part of incremental (rather than radical) social innovation (Marquess et al. 2017) in the process of place-shaping.

Our research has seen a wide range of innovative practice that continue to emerge in cultural meanwhile uses in the South West region. We uncovered accounts including:

○ The extended use of a three-story department store in Bristol to offer arts, environmental and ethical enterprise activities (see evaluation by Karimnia and Virani 2024)

○ Transformation of storage arches under a Southampton road into long-term, affordable artist studios

○ The development of innovative business models to ensure stable asset transfer of a concert venue in Frome

○ Access to vacant commercial spaces brokered by the business improvement district for the annual Bournemouth Writing Festival

○ Arts events including music festivals, visual arts weekends and cabaret in Gloucester's public spaces

The role of public bodies, such as ACE as well as local councils, is notable but not only for the funding they provide. Southampton City Council has delegated the management not just of the storage arches to the Artspace charity, but also the management of God's House Tower, a scheduled ancient monument. Interest in this arrangement is keen at Gloucester City Council, which owns Blackfriars Abbey, and has accommodated JOLT, an artists' incubation space, in one of its town centre properties. In Bristol, efforts by the City Council's cultural development team to assess the well-being benefits of participating in public cultural events is of keen interest to the local NHS. But public money is tight. Much less visible but also promising are efforts by the business improvement district in Bournemouth to secure meanwhile office space for the annual writing festival. Locally embedded landlords, as well as so-called 'anchor institutions' such as universities can work together to open up spaces for temporary exhibitions, thus incentivising creative graduates in the city.

Yet we also uncovered a long list of practical challenges associated with planning cultural meanwhile uses that are particularly hard to deal with on a small scale.

These include knowledge of space availability and property management; access to the appropriate materials logistics and access; understanding of the financial considerations and legal concerns including the fragility / temporary nature of tenancy both for owner and occupier. In the latter case, a consideration is to what degree users become saddled with unforeseen or unwelcome responsibilities. These may be linked, for example, to security arrangements, public tax liability and remedial building and utility works before intended cultural uses can begin. To overcome this, practical guides have been created by public and civil society organisations to support meanwhile innovation. These share and characterise experience and suggest changes to building use, property taxation and advocate multiple benefits to funders (e.g. Urban Foundry 2021; Todd and Rowe 2021, Lewis et al. 2022, Marko and Lisa 2022).

Our contribution here is not to champion cultural meanwhile use per se. We have tried to make clear that this activity represents one focal point for coming together to explore what culture means and how it can improve opportunities in particular places. Our research reiterates other critical reviews of cultural meanwhile use – that it can be exciting and inclusive, but it's not easy to do and that considering sustainability and community participation is essential if communities are not to suffer from the failed promises that ephemerality brings.

We want to suggest that the good ideas and collaborative relationships which make some meanwhile spaces a success should be examined, adapted, refined and shared in order that sustainability and community voices are always made central to them. This includes the need to collectively understand the financial and liability risks – for squeezed landlords, for overwhelmed councils and for local arts networks whose primary interest is not property management – associated with cultural meanwhile uses. Such real issues can be addressed within formats of cross-sectoral cultural leadership which focus on the place as a spatial 'community of practice' (Wegner, McDermott & Snyder 2002). Experimentation (in business models and legal models, building uses, evaluations) and the refinement of known innovations could start with transporting, trialling and reporting them within the region. In this way, cultural meanwhile use can be embedded – experimentally but systematically – within the cultural dimensions of urban place-shaping. A range of techniques and methodologies lend themselves to such innovations, involving varying degrees of complexity, such as living labs (Voytenko et al. 2016), hackathons (Johnson and Robinson 2014) and learning from community-focused and cross-sectoral social return on investment models[18].

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18 Community Rail Network, Community rail movement delivering social return on investment of nearly £18 for every £1. https://communityrail.org.uk/community-rail-movement-delivering-social-return-on-investment-of-nearly-18-for-every-1/

We suggest that some of the methodologies regarding engagement, data, place and pride from our recent research projects can facilitate a new framework for understanding cultural meanwhile use. This could include:

- a better understanding and assessing local communities' feelings about place
- more systematic approaches which enhance cultural democracy and stimulate civic engagement
- locally-specific technical guidance for private landlords to support them in making vacant properties and spaces available for cultural uses
- an understanding of existing models of risks and benefits linked to the transfer of community assets
- descriptions of innovations and business models that strengthen cultural entrepreneurship and infrastructure
- prototypes (e.g. of high streets and types of tenancies) that can be built around solutions to the challenges they face
- new models of leadership that can support community-driven decision making around cultural assets
- new strategies for evaluating cultural interventions and investment, and innovative uses of digital technology to generate and analyse qualitative, hyperlocal data.

An important foundational understanding for such a framework must be that innovation should strengthen cultural entrepreneurialism and the place-shaping value of artists and their networks. Art can make places better (for residents, visitors and commerce), but artists may not set out to achieve place-making as their mission. This indicates why cross-sectoral collaborations are needed to articulate, structure and enable change. Meanwhile use is, in this respect, a crucible in which civic cultural leadership is alloyed for wider place-making applications in the future.

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Image credits. Page 109: 'Foley' by Collective Contact, as featured at Weston Arts + Health Weekender. Photo: Andreas Stueckl. Page 113: Skate Southampton SLAMMA. Courtesy Skate Southampton and John Hansard Gallery. Photo: Sean Black.

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'From the Other': 25 years of Cultural Partnership Working in Salford

University of Salford and Salford City Council

'From the Other': 25 years of Cultural Partnership Working in Salford

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the University of Salford's role in shaping the cultural landscape of Salford during a time of regeneration, through partnership work with Salford City Council and key arts and cultural organisations in Salford. The paper provides brief case studies, outlining how relationships developed and were built upon in consecutive years. These case studies highlight how this long term joint working and co-creation laid the foundations for the formation of a city wide cultural strategy and effective governance and sharing mechanisms across city. In outlining key milestones, this paper foregrounds two of the central components that we believe are necessary for effective place-making. Firstly, that a city's people must be at the centre: 'a consciously present priority' (SCPP, 2020, p.8). While universities and organisations can be catalysts for cultural development, ultimately, they must create the conditions for the people to become makers and creators. Secondly, the paper makes the case that impactful partnerships are built on long-term collaboration that fosters trust and reciprocity.

Previous page: We Invented the Weekend at Media City. Photo: Natalie Argent

Key words

Salford, Regeneration, Partnerships, Co-Creation, Placemaking, Cultural Strategy

Introduction

Over the past twenty five years, the post-industrial city of Salford has undergone a form of culture-led regeneration, a process wherein cities 'seek to revive former industrial and waterfront sites and city centres, and establish themselves as competitive cities of culture' (Evans 2005, p.959). Despite its status as the 'Other' city, subservient to Manchester's industrial and creative cultures (Garrard and Kidd, 2018, p.37; Catalani and Panas, 2012, p.2), Salford is now the home of an emergent CreaTech[1] hub, and a burgeoning site of working-class cultural production (Wallace 2017, p.6). This paper outlines the work of the University of Salford and its partners, Salford City Council, Salford Community Leisure and arts and cultural organisations across Salford in supporting this growth over the last decade.[2] Unlike other

1 The CreaTech report by The Royal Anniversary Trust and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport defines CreaTech as: "the intersection of creativity, arts, culture, and technology, where innovative technologies are used to enhance creative processes, create new forms of artistic expression, and accelerate the economic growth and social benefits of the Creative Industries" (2025, p.2).
2 This also includes Lowry, From the Other, Walk the Plank, Islington Mill, the Working Class Movement Library and Salford Museum and Art Gallery.

modes of culture-led regeneration, which can be synonymous with the creation of a 'gentrified landscape' that focuses on 'middle-class cultures of consumption rather than working-class culture of production' (Paddison and Miles 2020, p.1973), Salford's anchor institutions have strived to support the transformation of Salford's former industrial areas and waterfront sites while maintaining and championing its artistic, working-class cultures.

In outlining key milestones within the past decade of co-creation, this paper makes the case that inclusive and sustainable culture-led regeneration is reliant upon the intersection of a people-centred and place-led approach. Whilst universities and local authorities can be catalysts for cultural development, ultimately, they must create the conditions for the people to become makers and creators. By offering a brief account of the city-wide collaboration over the past decade, this paper shows the ways that academic, governmental and arts organisations have worked together to place grassroots culture and ground-up creativity at the heart of developing the cultural and historic centre of Salford. In tracing long-term partnership work, this paper also demonstrates that effective culture-led regeneration requires long-term relationships that foster trust and reciprocity between individuals and organisations.

To do this, this paper presents some shared case studies relating to The Crescent and Salford Quays, the site of two of

the university campuses, to showcase the partnership building that has taken place over the last ten years from 2014-2024. It outlines the socio-political contexts of Salford, and the emergence of the Salford Culture and Place Partnership (SCPP), a cultural compact formed in 2018, that aims to 'create and deliver a plan to maximise social and economic benefits from a thriving cultural ecosystem' (2018). It then offers a brief insight to the city's partnership goals from 2025 onwards. With over a decade of joint work having been undertaken by the primary authors, Ingleson and Taylor, numerous projects have been realised, both locally and internationally. For the context of this paper, we are citing those within the Crescent and the Quays.

Context of Salford

Despite Salford's historic and recent successes, Salford is a city that was and continues to be an 'urban entity' that has 'developed under the shadow of Manchester' (Catalani and Panas 2012, p.2) and its numerous museums, libraries and theatres. Although joined together via the River Irwell that runs through both cities, Salford is distinctly separate from Manchester, and its people and organisations have been committed to fortifying a creative and culture identity that is also distinct. (One example of this is the establishment of 'Sounds From The Other City', from which the paper takes its name. The festival started in response to a lack of Salford representation in Manchester's 'Sounds of

the City', to assert itself as a cultural hub alongside Manchester).

The City of Salford has historically been a site of cultural innovation, creativity, and reformation of working-class rights. During the nineteenth century, Salford was thought to be the backdrop against which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote The Condition of the Working Class in England (1845), and the birthplace of the five-day working week thanks to the establishment of Robert Lowes' call for 'The Factory Act'. The demand for new industrial skills led to the formation of the Pendleton Mechanics Institute in 1850 and the Salford Working Men's College in 1858. These merged in 1896 to become the Salford Royal Technical Institute (based in what is now the Peel building) before eventually becoming the University of Salford in 1967. The Peel building is adjacent to Peel Park (the first public park paid for by public subscription) and Salford Museum and Art Gallery (which opened in 1850 as the Royal Museum and Public Library) demonstrating the ambition of Victorian Salford to improve the lives of the people through education, access to green spaces and arts and culture.

The University of Salford's approach to culture-led regeneration has been long underpinned by its people-centred ethos. Upon receiving the Royal Charter in 1967, the University of Salford was, physically and metaphorically, more than simply "an ivory tower set in the green fields" (Whitworth 1968, p.12, quoted in Hadfield 2024).

Upon his installation, the Vice-Chancellor Sir Clifford Whitworth emphasised that Salford's mission extended beyond the pursuit of academic prestige. This vision strengthened the deeper connections with the heart of the City of Salford, whereby the industries, communities and people were central. Salford positioned itself as a national institution while embracing a long-standing heritage that remained deeply rooted in the local community. This reciprocal working between the Council and the University has its origins in the first masterplan in 1961 and continues today in the form of the Crescent Development Framework, a long-term vision for Salford over the next 20 years that will bring together industry, education and innovation.[3]

Salford Quays, previously known as Salford Docks, is one part of the city that has been a site of differing modes of regeneration. Opened by Queen Victoria in 1894 as part of the Port of Manchester, Salford Quays was initially considered a 'masterpiece of engineering' (Catalani and Panas 2012, p.2). Almost a century later, however, the Quays were considered to be a 'derelict' (Bäing and Wong 2018, p.514) brownfield site. Upon its closure in 1982, Salford Quays witnessed the loss of 3,000 jobs and increased environmental degradation. In 1987, Peel Holdings acquired the Ship Ca-

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3 This has come to be known as the Campus Connectivity Plan, creating a new city district that will bring together industry, education, and innovation.

nal Company, of which the Quays were part, and formed a full 'Salford Quays Development Plan'. As Anna Catalani and Pam Panas explain, this plan sought to 'improve infrastructures and the environment including, water, roads, public access and landscape of the docklands area' (2012, p.2). Whilst this approach was certainly person-centred in its goals to ameliorate quality of life for Salford residents, the demands of this type of regeneration required the prioritisation of economic growth over cultural rejuvenation.

To address the paucity of cultural activity, Salford City Council reviewed the original development plan in 1988, identifying the need for a flagship development on the Quays, and proposed the Centre for Performing Arts that would later become The Lowry in 2000.[4] The Council were successful in 'attracting streams of government regeneration funding targeted at the city's poorer residential districts' (Wallace, 2017, p.6), including Millennium and other British and European funds and private sector finance. Funding was secured in 1996 and The Lowry Trust became responsible for the creation of The Lowry.

The extent of Salford City Council's forward-thinking commitment and successful cultural regeneration plan galvanised in 2006 with the partial relocation of global media companies BBC and ITV from London to Salford Quays. The arrival of these

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4 The Lowry' undertook a rebrand in 2025 and is now referred to as 'Lowry.'

companies to Salford's docklands signalled an invested interest in the development of Salford's people, culture and place. This move demonstrated a 'definable increase in northern commentary and opinions on news and current affairs programming' (O'Reilly and Rabbitts 2019, p.1817). What would shift the nomenclature from its working-class origins of 'Salford Quays' to the lucrative 'Media City UK', would also enable Salford to be 'envisaged as a world class hub for innovation and content creation, with up to 15,000 jobs and £1 billion added to the regional economy within 5 years' (Knowles and Binder 2018, p.3).

Challenges to Culture-led Regeneration

This national and local socio-economic context resulted in two key challenges to partnership approaches to placemaking in Salford. The first challenge was related to the financial infrastructures of Higher Education and its incongruence with the cultural sector, and the second relates potential disenfranchisement of working-class residents in the process of culture-led regeneration.

Prior to the person-centred notions of civic responsibility and social value featuring in University Strategies, the key markers of success for universities across the UK were shaped by research income and student recruitment and retention. In their 2016 paper, Francesca Pucciarelli and Andreas Kaplan identify three key drivers of Higher Education, namely '(1) the need to enhance prestige and market share; (2)

the need to embrace an entrepreneurial mindset; and (3) the need to expand interactions and value co-creation with key stakeholders' (2016, p. 311). Pucciarelli and Kaplan's summary conveys that in the 2010s, economic growth took precedence over the university's role in placemaking and enhancing the cultural vibrancy of its immediate locale. This meant that any university-led cultural activity took place without any strategic framework or earmarked financial support. Therefore, even when relationships with arts organisations were established, the longevity of these relationships was uncertain, as there was an inability to make substantial commitments to resource sharing or establish a long-term programme of activity.

Whilst the arrival of the BBC and ITV to Salford was a huge success in terms of unlocking Salford's CreaTech potential, this transformation brought with it its own challenges relating to the gentrification of a historically working-class space and the creation of a potentially underserved and disenfranchised working-class population. Although a signifier for economic and cultural growth, Salford was subject to a reality in which '"development" in one place is typically accompanied by underdevelopment in another' (Christophers 2008, p.2314). Already existing as 'the fourth most deprived local authority area in the North West of England and the 28th most deprived (from 152) nationally' (Wallace 2015, p. 520), this reshaping of the quays proposed some risks as to 'accentuate so-cio-economic polarisation' (Christophers 2008, p.2323) wherein Salford could become a place of economic unevenness. Collaborative place-making was therefore a priority for ensuring the people of Salford were a part of Salford's regeneration.

Creating the Conditions for Cultural Partnership Work across the City

Without any formalised, central university strategy, the foundations of early cultural partnership working were owed to the tenacity of individual university staff. The primary authors of this paper both come from a background in Visual Arts and Socially Engaged practice. They understood the role the University could play in supporting the cultural ecosystem of Salford, and the wider community through engagement, co-creation, and co-commissioning. Students and new graduates would benefit from this partnership development as they needed industry experience if they were to be successful in their chosen careers.

The university's early partnership working was borne out of a commitment to enhancing the student experience and responding to organisations requests to work with students as part of their corporate and civic responsibility through cultural activity. Live briefs and partnership agreements with organisations and festivals developed, including Sounds From The Other City, the Bridgewater Canal archive project, and a public art commission for the Salford Royal Hospital. As well as students, this partnership working also supported graduates through the Graduate Scholarship Programme that was developed with Castlefield Gallery and artist studios across Salford. Graduates received studio space within these communities, alongside mentoring and professional development. Since 2014, more than fifty graduates have completed the programme.[5] This programme has ensured a commitment and long-term relationship with the studios, with the result that many alumni of the scheme are now permanent members of those communities as studio holders, staff or associates.

Whilst Taylor was working with studios in Salford and was co-chair of Contemporary Visual Arts Manchester, studios across Manchester were having to relocate due to Manchester's redevelopment and the rising property prices (Atkinson 2020, p. 227). This issue was addressed with Salford re-positioning itself as the city of makers through a bid for Arts Council England's Ambition for Excellence programme. The bid was jointly developed by University of Salford, Castlefield Gallery and artist studios across Salford and Manchester. Although unsuccessful, the process of developing the bid was valuable in creating the conditions for wider collaborative working. Most artists or small arts organisations had previously not known how to approach the University with ideas. The ambition to be a city of makers took hold, and the conversations paved the way for a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between University of Salford, Salford City Council, the Lowry and Arts Council England in 2016, which in turn led to the development of Salford Culture and Place Partnership.

The Salford Culture and Place Partnership (SCPP) is a cultural compact that operates at the intersection of a people-centred and place-led approach to culture-led regeneration, and brings together the City Council, University, the Lowry, Arts Council England, Islington Mill, Walk the Plank, the BBC and Royal Horticultural Society (RHS). The SCPP has aims of representing and enhancing all of Salford's cultural and creative sector and defines itself as a 'partnership of specialist organisations which use their expertise of the creative and cultural sector to co-create, promote, champion and advise on all things culture and creativity in Salford'.

Paul Dennett, the Salford City Mayor since 2016, has been instrumental in championing the formation of this compact. Dennett's long-term tenure as the mayor has created a stable political environment for the city, and his underlying socialist principles have contributed to the city's approach to culture and placemaking (see also Dennett 2021). The mayoral role defines the city mayor as the first citizen of the city who is responsible for developing strong working relationships with partners across the city, including community groups, businesses and the voluntary sector.[6]

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5 Current studio partners now include Islington Mill, Paradise Works and Hot Bed Press.

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6 Dennett is supported in his cabinet by

With the City Council investing in a Head of Partnership role (Sarie Mairs Slee), the partners developed a Strategy for Culture, Creativity and Place that launched in 2020. The strategy clearly articulated the SCPP's person-centred approach with the title Suprema Lex, taken from the city's motto Salus populi suprema lex – the welfare of the people is the highest law. It states:

"By 2030, Salford will have earned a global reputation as an open city where creativity and social innovation thrive and feed one another, a city that shares its cultural riches with the world".

The strategy was modelled around one key pillar: 'People at the Centre', with an objective to 'Maximise opportunities for Salfordians' to make, create and benefit from cultural experiences, careers or business'. Around this pillar revolved four others: 'Destination Salford', 'City of Making and Creating', 'Animating the City', and 'Places and Spaces'. These demonstrate the Council's commitment to a form of culture-led regeneration that is attentive to the needs and wants of its residents.

In 2023 the City Council invested further in the SCPP, recruiting a Director of Culture for the City, Darren Grice, who brought to the Council his previous experience as Strategic Development Lead:

Culture and Visitor Economy at Rochdale Borough Council. This coincided with new leadership at the University with the appointment of Professor Nic Beech as Vice Chancellor, which has given the university a renewed vision for its role in civic and social justice.

Peel Campus and Crescent Cultural Quarter: Context and Case Study

The Crescent area of Salford had the potential to be a thriving 'cultural quarter' partly due to the proximity of key partners; the university's arts building, New Adelphi, Salford Museum and Art Gallery (SMAG), and the Working Class Movement Library,[7] alongside the first civic park, Peel Park.

In 2017, during the 50th year celebrations of university status, Taylor worked with the Salford Museum and Art Gallery to curate an exhibition entitled 'What's in Store?'. This showcased the University's Art Collection, including new commissions by Salford based artists. This was the first formal work between the University

and the Museum and led to a MoU. This agreement outlined practical and logistical collaboration, exploring sharing storage and exhibition space, but also delineating shared philanthropic and Research and Development ambitions (2017, p.2). These included aims to 'develop a shared strategic vision and identity for culture' across Salford, and the development of opportunities for local, Salford-based artists, supporting the City of Makers ambitions as well as academic programme development, joint funding applications, and widening participation initiatives.

In 2020, Arts Council England funded Rediscovering Salford, a city-wide creative project established to celebrate the opening of RHS Gardens Bridgewater, the largest gardening project in Europe.[8] 'Rediscovering Salford' aimed to remind residents and visitors about the wealth of green spaces, parks and gardens in the city.[9] This included a co-curated exhibition at SMAG entitled You Belong Here and included works from both the University and the Museum Collections. These were complemented with new commissions by four artists from

Islington Mill and Paradise Works studios. In addition, the Art Collection commissioned The Storm Cone, an artwork experienced through an AR app for Peel Park. The artist engaged staff and students from across the School of Arts, Media and Creative Technology (SAMCT) to co-create the work.[10] Both The Storm Cone and the new commissions for You Belong Here are now in the University Art Collection as a legacy of the project. Rediscovering Salford was successful in engaging new audiences in culture. Over 60% of participants at the final event had never attended creative events in Salford's cultural venues before, and yet 97% of participants expressed interest in attending similar events in the future. The age group with the highest attendance was 55–64-year-olds, who made up 24.62% of audiences. This evidenced the inclusive nature of the event, as in their review of placemaking initiatives, Peyman Najafi et al. conclude that 'seniors are often excluded from the placemaking process' (2022, p.537). Rediscovering Salford was thus successful in its engaging of both new audiences and underrepresented age groups.

Building upon this success, in June 2021 the University and City Council collaborated with partners across the city to hold a big outdoor party at the Crescent, Salford Rediscovered, to celebrate the work that had been created across the city during the pandemic. This place-based part-

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Councillor Hannah Robinson-Smith as Lead Member for Culture, Heritage, Equalities, Sports and Leisure, who also plays an active role in Salford's cultural landscape.

7 The Working Class Movement Library (WCML) is a Charity established in 1971 to care for the library and archive collection covering 200 years of working-class history. The Charity, supported by the City Council, found its new home in Salford in 1987. As part of the charity constitution, there is a place on the trustee board for a university representative (Ingleson). Partnership work has included providing the library with operational resources, and staff and students' utilisation of the collection and its historic reading rooms.

8 The project was led by the SCPP, specifically the University of Salford Art Collection, Salford Museum and Art Gallery, Salford City Council, RHS and the Lowry working closely with START Creative and Walk the Plank.
9 The project was originally planned for summer 2020 and therefore had to adapt with the COVID-19 crisis with an extended time frame. The University and Visual Arts organisations and studios across Salford met regularly during the crisis to share knowledge and find collective solutions.

10 This work, made by Laura Daly, was recently shortlisted for a Lumens Prize.

nership work led to the formation of the Crescent Cultural Collective, which now includes local organisations From the Other, Walk the Plank, START Creative and Joss Arnott Dance. The City Council were able to invest £45,000 of its UK Shared Prosperity Funding to 'support local arts, culture, heritage and creative activities' into the work programme of the Crescent partnership to help build capacity, profile and programming for 2024 (ACE, 2025).

The cultural life of the Crescent was enhanced further by the university's partnership with From the Other. Since 2017, SAMCT has supported Sounds From the Other City (SFTOC), an annual festival of new music and art. Established in 2005, the festival champions local promoters and celebrates the off-kilter beauty of Salford, the oft-overlooked 'other city' to Manchester. In 2024, the University and From the Other hosted the main hub for the one-day festival with five live stages across Peel Park Campus, SMAG and WCML, and showcased a major new commission by the University Art Collection in collaboration with the University's Energy House Research facility and Acoustics department. The festival attracted 3000 visitors and provided 34 Student Placements. Feedback from the 2024 festival highlighted the creative and diverse offering. The University is committed to hosting the 20th edition in 2025.

Salford Quays and MediaCity: context and case study

The University's commitment to the city was strengthened by establishing a new campus at MediaCity, which opened in 2011. The staff and students based at MediaCity work alongside the 250 Creative industries organisations, including Lowry. The long-term partnership with Lowry has included co-commissioning, student opportunities and staff research projects across visual arts, performance, and community outreach. Lowry, along with the University and Walk the Plank secured £1 million pounds funding from Arts Council England to establish 'Stage Directions', a theatre-based initiative (2019-2022) that sought to reach key Salford communities through delivering training in design, and technical theatre and digital arts, enabling hundreds of children to watch a theatre production for the first time. In addition, 84 young people working with creative practitioners directed, produced and performed in three new productions across the city. The University was host to the summer intensive theatre programme led by Walk the Plank for 48 young people.

The long-term delivery of 'Stage Directions' required the creation of a Local Cultural Education Partnership (LCEP), defined as 'place-based groups of influential experts, united by their desire to improve cultural education for local children and young people' (SLCEP, 2024).[11] The LCEP exists

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11 The LCEP brings together representatives

beyond the lifespan of the original Stage Directions funding. It reports up to the SCPP and is currently developing a new strategy for cultural delivery for all young people across Salford.

Ten years after its launch, MediaCity is, in some cases, still perceived as an exclusive corporate space detached from the rest of Salford in terms of class and culture. The 'We Invented the Weekend Festival' (WITW) was conceived through a place-making consultation with key stakeholders across Salford Quays and MediaCity with the aim of creating a free festival for all of Salford.[12] The festival, which launched in 2023, encourages Salford and Greater Manchester residents to take over Media City and Salford Quays' spaces and places, to celebrate the joy of free time, taking in culture, sports, music, comedy, theatre, dance, workshops, talks, food, wellness, and crafts.[13] In 2024, the festival had grown to attract 96,000 attendees and contributed to a local economic impact of £3.6 million.

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from the University, the City Council, Salford Community Leisure, Salford City College, and Salford Schools alongside Lowry, Walk the Plank, DIY Theatre Company and RHS Bridgewater.
12 The University sits on the festival board alongside, Lowry, Salford City Council, GMCA, MediaCity (Landsec), and the BBC, and is governed and supported by the SCPP.
13 This consultation brought attention to role of Salford in initiating 'The Factory Act', and the actions of Lyceum Director and workers' rights activist Robert Lowes in his campaign to win workers the right to leisure time on Saturday afternoons; effectively inventing the weekend.

Reflection

The success of Salford's culture-led regeneration is owed to the people-centred and place-led approach that has maintained the city's people as 'a consciously present priority' (SCPP, 2020, p.8). Regeneration through culture needs to start with the people at its core, in shared citywide values and a shared mission. This can only occur through sustained leadership, collaboration, and a long-term vision.

These case studies demonstrate that, whilst Salford has historically been perceived as the 'Other' city, often overlooked in favour of Manchester's industrial and creative outputs (Garrard and Kidd 2018, p.37), this subsidiary status has also been generative of a unique relationship to place and placemaking. Without the level of global attention that Manchester faces, Salford has been able to forge its own identity that has stayed true to its socialist roots and embraced its 'outsider' status. This relationship is one that not only acknowledges the potential of cultural engagement but is a catalyst for the empowerment of residents in taking ownership of the art and culture that they themselves produce in processes of placemaking.

This paper has offered an overview of the last 25 years of culture-led regeneration in Salford, focusing on the last ten years of partnership working and should acknowledge that this longevity is owed to the consistency of leadership across the University, the city and the key anchor

organisations. Working together over this time scale has required tenacity and reciprocal trust between individual representatives from each organisation. Their joint approach to reach out, to listen, share resources, forge links and collaborate with others for the benefit of staff, students and the communities has enabled the partnerships to mature. Interventions into the cultural life of Salford were thanks to the incentive of individuals working to nurture and strengthen city-wide cultural links with limited resources and only localised authority. This maturity, that has led the implementation of the SCPP framework, has enabled the city-wide cultural strategy to be delivered.

How Can the Innovation be Sustained? The Next 10 Years

These case studies demonstrate how smaller partnership work has grown to a city-wide commitment to work collaboratively to create the conditions for residents to engage with and create culture. With established structures and ways of working in place, the city is now refreshing its cultural strategy for the next ten years. In 2024, the SCPP commissioned a city-wide Creative and Cultural Asset Review, which identified Salford Crescent and Salford Quays as distinct cultural districts within Salford. The consultants assessed current baseline, issues, opportunities and established key priorities working closely with cultural organisations and city council teams including regeneration,

property, and economy. The increased understanding of our city-wide creative and cultural assets and related economic and social drivers have given partners across the SCPP a shared framework of reference from defined geographical cultural districts to more granular insight into individual creative sectors.

If 2024 was the year of laying some new foundations, 2025 will be a creative 'build' year enabling partners to co-create the next iteration of the city-wide vision and strategy ready to commence the next phase from 2026 onwards. A consortium led by the University has recently submitted an application to Arts Council England's Creative People and Places Programme. If successful, this will support developing the cultural offer across the whole of the city, through empowering local residents to decide what creative activity they want to experience locally to ensure that Salford's person-centred and place-led cultural approach can be expanded across the city. Through this bidding process a new forum for capturing grassroots cultural opinion has been developed and will be led by Salford CVS.

The importance of recognising and embedding cultural placemaking has been strengthened with the arrival of a new Vice Chancellor, Prof. Nic Beech, and his commitment to the principle of innovating to enrich lives as a key component of all university activity. Reflecting upon the university's Social and Economic Impact Report, Salford Mayor Paul Dennett com-

mented that: "By working together, along with other key partners across the city, we can continue to harness the strengths of the University and the city to achieve even greater outcomes. The journey outlined in this report is just the beginning of a new phase of transforming Salford into a beacon of innovation and progress, making a lasting impact for generations to come". In his statement, Dennett articulates the necessity of collaborative working and place-making in engendering development or 'progress' that is sustainable in its creation of lasting impact.

Looking ahead, it is an exciting time for the city of Salford and its partners. 2026 will mark the 100th anniversary of Salford being awarded city status, providing a timely opportunity to consolidate our thinking and amplify our impact. Currently, live projects are in delivery to develop creative networks, undertake community consultation, and explore new approaches to embed equity and accessibility for people with disabilities and long-term conditions. Further strategic development includes co-design of cultural programmes with children and young people, and hyper-local cultural projects delivered city-wide that challenge traditional definitions of art and culture and address the question: 'whose art, whose culture?'.

As we move through 2025, this provides the opportunity to develop new strategically aligned thinking around policy, priorities, potential partnerships and deployment of existing and new resources in an increasingly meaningful way. As MediaCity is increasingly becoming a home for CreaTech, we will look to bring the leaders from within Salford creative industries more into the SCPP and cultural and creative governance within the city.

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See also

○ https://www.mediacityuk.co.uk
○ Graduate Scholars Programme https://artcollection.salford.ac.uk/graduate-scholarship-programme/#:~:text=The%20Graduate%20Scholarship%20Programme%20is,in%20collaboration%20with%20Castlefield%20Gallery.
○ https://wcml.org.uk
○ https://salfordmuseum.com/rediscovering-salford/
○ https://soundsfromtheothercity.com
○ https://salfordlcep.com/what-is-an-lcep.html#/
○ https://www.weinventedtheweekend.com
○ https://www.salford.ac.uk/campus/estates/campus-connectivity-plan

- https://confidentials.com/manchester/
  artists-v-property-developers-
  manchesters-growing-dilemma
- https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/01/
  sensible-socialism-the-salford-model

Case study: Sunderland, a city of partnerships

Sunderland City Council

Culture, Place and Development

CASE STUDY: SUNDERLAND, A CITY OF PARTNERSHIPS

Peter McIntyre

There can be few more impactful examples of partnership-led regeneration than in Sunderland, with collaboration driving economic, social and cultural transformation on a scale not seen in living memory.

The strength and depth of partnerships that have been formed across the public and private sector are testament to a local authority that understands the power of coming together in pursuit of a common goal. And that can be seen in high definition with the collaboration between Sunderland City Council and the University of Sunderland.

Sunderland is a city transforming... Ambitious about its future, and rapidly and steadfastly focused on overcoming its challenges, to create a world-class place to live, work, study and play.

The vision is one that is shared among key city stakeholders, who recognise that a strong city will help realise their own organisational goals. And this is never truer than for the University of Sunderland, whose success is built on the city's reputation and reality, and equally, who can play a significant role in advancing the aims of a progressive and delivery focused council; a symbiotic partnership that is changing and growing with the city.

Background and context

Sunderland became a city in 1992, the same year in which Sunderland Technical College – as it then was – gained university status. Against a backdrop of devastating industrial decline – with the final mine in the city closing in 1993, spelling the end of an industry that supported many thousands of jobs in Sunderland – the area slumped into a period of high unemployment and with it, significant economic and societal challenges. Like many post-industrial cities, the impact of the closure of mines – and, in Sunderland, the shipyards which had for centuries been the lifeblood of the place – has been enduring. As the city has worked to rebuild, alongside it, the partnership between the local authority and the University has too strengthened, and the two organisations are now moving in lockstep to tackle the most prevailing and deep-rooted challenges to fall out of the loss of industry, which is yielding incredible outcomes.

Sunderland: a city of partnerships

Sunderland, through strong public-private sector partnerships, is now repeatedly held up nationally as an example of a place experiencing an economic, social and cultural renaissance. "A poster child of coastal regeneration" and "home to the UK's most ambitious urban regeneration project" are among the headlines coming out of this post-industrial Northern heartland and partnership has been a key driver of its ongoing evolution.

Led by a local authority that puts innovation at the heart of its approach, Sunderland has created a city of collaboration, with cohesive, joined up leadership between anchor organisations ensuring there is one shared vision for the city, and a concerted drive to see it through.

Sunderland is proud to be a university city. With campuses in its city centre, and on the edge of its stunning riverside, the University of Sunderland is an anchor institution that is leading the drive to forge a brighter future for this regenerating seaside city, standing shoulder to shoulder with the council in this endeavour.

As Sunderland's transformation advances at pace, led by the local authority brokering the support of institutional investors such as Legal & General, the university is itself investing some £100 million into revamping its estate, creating innovative new learning environments to enable graduates to leave with skills and experience that will enhance the workplaces they join. And there can be few more impressive examples of university estates investment than the development of a state-of-the-art simulated healthcare environment, which was designed to provide students with realistic hands-on training opportunities. The university's Living Lab is one of the country's largest and best-equipped facilities of its kind. It includes a simulated training ambulance, hospital ward, community pharmacy, and a dental clinic – not to mention a highly-trained technical team working behind the scenes. The lab allows students to practice their clinical skills using the latest technologies, in a safe, controlled environment and includes an interactive immersive suite, which taps into connectivity that has been delivered by the Council's ambitious smart city programme, designed to enable partners to benefit from the best soft-infrastructure available.

The University also taps into city-wide innovation to enhance its student experience in many other ways, with Sunderland City Council and Boldyn Networks working in partnership with the institution to expand EduROAM to the city's outdoor wifi network, enabling seamless, secure connectivity for students, educators, and researchers; a council-led programme fuelling the University of Sunderland's ability to create a better student experience.

A 5G test lab has also been developed on the University's Sir Tom Cowie campus at St Peter's, meaning the University of Sunderland is one of the UK's first 5G-enabled universities, putting it at the forefront of smart education. As well as technology enhanced teaching environments, the university has also been able to be at the cutting-edge of research opportunities for uses of 5G and Internet of Things (IoT) in key local sectors including manufacturing and health care.

This, however, is not just about the on-campus outcomes of partnership. The work of the council and university together is a true civic partnership that is driving change on many fronts.

An economic driver

Like all universities, Sunderland is an institution that is, by its nature, uplifting the skills base in the city and across the North East of England. Named as one of the UK's Top 40 universities in the Guardian University Guide 2025, the life-changing University of Sunderland has 25,600 students based in campuses in Sunderland, London, Hong Kong, and at its global partnerships with learning institutions in 15 countries. In Sunderland, the university is well known for its long-established commitment to widening participation, with many of its student population made up of the indigenous population, who are looking to better their skills and secure a brighter future. The University is focused on ensuring our graduates leave equipped with the knowledge, skills, confidence, and connections to make a positive difference in the wider world, but – importantly, and increasingly – its courses are built around emerging industries in Sunderland.

In 2022, it was announced that the British Esports Federation would be creating a National Esports Performance Campus in Sunderland, establishing the city as the definitive home of British Esports, where innovation, passion and dedication create a haven for amateur esports enthusiasts and aspiring professionals alike. The product of hard work and support from Sunderland City Council's inward investment team, British Esports Federation's arrival in the city saw organisations leap to support this emerging industry, with the University of Sunderland delivering an Esports Event Management BSc, that will support the development of the talent needed to fuel its growth.

And there are countless more examples of this partnership-working helping to unlock the economic potential of Sunderland.

In 2021, it was announced that global production company Fulwell 73 would be opening its first studio in Sunderland, based at the University of Sunderland's St Peter's Campus. Having worked on a docu-series set in the city, Sunderland Til I Die – a passion project of Fulwell 73's diehard Sunderland supporting founders – the firm was convinced by the university to open a base on St Peter's campus, enabling the firm to contribute to the screen sector, which was beginning to gather momentum across the North East. The University of Sunderland offered up space to the company, on a campus that is awash with creative talent, thanks to its best-in-class facilities for TV and media production. It was to be the start of a relationship that could see Sunderland become home to one of Europe's largest film studios…

At Sunderland's annual Business Festival, supported by both the Council and the University, founding partner of Fulwell 73, Leo Pearlman, was asked why Sunderland didn't have its own film studios. Having seen, first-hand, the collaborative efforts of the city's ambitious council, and a fully supportive university, Leo was inspired to drive forward with audacious plans to attract the investment needed to build a 20-stage studio complex on the banks of the River Wear. The Council and the University rallied around the plans, demonstrating a commitment to helping Fulwell 73 drive forward as an ambassador of the city, and is in active discussions that will deliver a world-class studios for Sunderland. Working with key partners – including North East Screen, the organisation charged with unlocking the potential of the region for screen industries – the council orchestrated the development of an eco-system of support, to ensure that the plans would stand the best chance of success.

North East Screen now calls a council-owned building home, and serves the whole of the region from its Sunderland base, and the local authority also brokered the help of the North East Combined Authority, which made supporting the studio plans one of its first commitments as a devolved authority. The work extended further, with the council and the university active supporters of a skills programme that seeks to quickly build the talent pipeline that will be needed to operate a facility of this scale, and – lobbying by both partners – played a key role in securing Government support for the scheme, with remediation works set to get started within weeks.

This is a game-changing opportunity. Crown Works Studios, so-called after the former Crown Works shipyard that stood on the site some 40 years ago, will see an area of brownfield land transformed into the thriving hub of a brand-new industry for Sunderland. It will leverage significant private sector investment to deliver a facility that could create more than 8,000 high-value jobs, and generating £336 million a year in GVA.

And, beyond this, there is now a drive, again, to prepare the city for the huge wave of change that will wash over Sunderland as a result of the arrival of this monolithic studio. The university is a key partner, along with a range of other organisations – including North East Screen – helping to make preparations for the seismic change this will bring, with an active strategy around student accommodation, improved leisure developments and a range of exciting new cultural hubs that are being developed in partnership with organisations including the university to cater for a city demographic that is rapidly changing and set to further evolve as new, high value jobs arrive thanks to the £3bn programme of regeneration that is supercharging all corners of the city.

Indeed, as the city council executes a huge programme of regeneration across the whole of Sunderland, a key facet of its plans is student accommodation, and the local authority has demonstrated a willingness to co-invest in high-quality housing that not only supports students' academic journey, but that shows them the fantastic work-life balance that can be achieved in this city by the sea.

At the heart of Sunderland City Council's regeneration programme is Riverside Sunderland. Centred around a former brewery site, acres of brownfield had stood empty for more than 20 years, the stalemate the result of a longstanding row between the city council and retail giant Tesco, whose plan it was to build a giant store on the land. After securing the site, the city council embarked on a transformational programme, which – over the last ten years has seen it transform from a wasteland into a unique urban quarter – an extraordinary place to live, work and play. When complete, the site will house 1m sq ft of high-quality office space, and – with a renewed focus from the university on the role it can play in driving spin outs and start-ups – there is now a concerted drive to maximise the economic impact that the university can have on Sunderland.

The aim is for the university to support the development of a steady stream of businesses, who – in time – will take up residence in the offices being built in and around Riverside Sunderland. And, in turn, as it delivers on incredible place-changing redevelopment, the council will create a place with greater magnetism – somewhere students love and graduates wish to remain. Included in these plans is a vital piece of infrastructure that will better connect the University of Sunderland's two campuses which stand either side of the River. The city council is in the final phase of construction works to build a pedestrian crossing over the Wear, that will

close the gap between these communities and make it easier for students at the university to move between campuses.

Alongside this, the city council is a key stakeholder in plans to expand the footprint – and with it, the remit and impact – of the city's Business Improvement District (BID) with the intention of creating a seaside BID to build a pond transformation and regeneration in Roker and Seaburn, Sunderland's two coastal resorts. The new BID, which requires significant funding from the council, could deliver game-changing benefits for the university, strengthening the connectivity between the city centre and the Riverside, where Sunderland's campuses stand apart. This is yet another significant step towards delivering an enhanced experience for students and will also aim to attract more and better businesses to the city centre and seaside, to deliver a more compelling offer for visitors and residents alike. This initiative is another product of partnership working, and something that is supported by the university and council.

As new spaces and places rise from the ground – from housing to offices, and leisure venues to a £450m film studio destined for the banks of the Wear – and as the city scape changes, there is a recognition that, through collaboration, the city can drive the cultural evolution needed to make itself a world-class place to live, work, and play. And Sunderland is making rapid progress towards this aim, with more than £600m worth of live regeneration pro-

jects underway at Riverside Sunderland, and more than £3bn of investment being ploughed into the whole city right now.

A cultural collaboration

In 2019, Sunderland City Council, the University of Sunderland and an organisation called the MAC Trust – set up to spur on the creation of a new Cultural Quarter in the city centre – came together to form Sunderland Culture, recognising the need to have a specialist delivery vehicle capable of attracting greater funding into the city, and to ensure that culture was at the beating heart of the city's regeneration.

Sunderland Culture brings together some of the city's key cultural assets and activities to realise the ambition of a place brimming with creative potential. The organisation – backed by the council and the university – delivers the programme in the National Glass Centre, Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens and Arts Centre Washington, as well as with communities across the city. A registered charity and an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation, Sunderland Culture has leveraged much greater investment into the city since being formed, with every single penny invested in activity that will improve life for everyone in Sunderland through culture.

Sunderland Culture works across the city with communities and local partners to ensure the power of great art, its unique cul-

ture and boundless creativity is harnessed for the benefit of Sunderland, its residents and visitors.

The organisation's approach to working in partnership with core partners, as well as local and national partners is widely recognised as an exemplar model of place-based working. In a similar vein, Cultural Spring – a charity well-supported by the university and serving Sunderland and South Tyneside – is working to leave a lasting legacy of communities interested in the arts. It works closely with Sunderland Culture to increase participation in arts and culture, enable more excellent art and creativity, help communities to set up and run sustainable events and workshops independently, as well as reflect on and share learning.

This spirit of collaboration has been exemplified recently, as Sunderland Culture, backed by the University, and Sunderland City Council have worked together to find a way of retaining glassmaking in the city, after it became clear that the current home of this heritage city skill – the National Glass Centre – would need to be closed.

Sunderland Culture has been awarded a £5m grant by the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, and will collaborate with partners including the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) along with Sunderland City Council and the University of Sunderland on the development of Glassworks: Sunderland – an ambitious, new world-class facility for glassmaking, just

the latest example of the local authority and university coming together to support cultural renewal in the city.

Glassworks: Sunderland is intended to become a nationally significant centre of excellence for glassmaking, connecting Sunderland's 1350 years of glassmaking heritage and the city's creative future. The expectation is that it will be one of the few places in the UK with specialist glassmaking facilities for artists and participants to create and produce in glass – safeguarding glassmaking in the city, driving growth and productivity among creative business-es, and supporting cultural regeneration and placemaking.

Development of the partnership project is still at an early stage, with funding announced in January 2025, but the city has been buoyed by its success in securing the maximum available funding under the CDF programme and, the next step will be for the partners to come together with glassmakers to develop a robust business model for what will become a self-sustaining glassmaking hub.

Through their collaboration, the Council and University and the city's creative and cultural organisations are playing a pivotal place-shaping role, attracting inward investment that will bring about a cultural revival in Sunderland. Much of this work – delivering the future city – was celebrated at a two-day conference in October 2024, when a national spotlight shone on City Hall for Expo Sunderland, a programme backed by the university that showcased the dynamic, future focused city Sunderland now is. And, as the transformation of the place gathers pace, it will be the ongoing partnerships between the council and the university that will ensure that this is a place people study, stay, play and make their home. A place with the cultural capital to inspire the brightest minds, and the opportunities available to retain them in the long-term too.

Driving social change

Through the advancement of skills in the city, the University of Sunderland has long played a vital role in driving social change. But a determination to go further and leverage its capacity to inform change is at the heart of a new institute, formed by the university to secure a societal shift.

The Institute for Economic and Social Inclusion (IESI) exists to promote positive societal change and to address the causes and consequences of economic and social exclusion within society.

IESI brings together research, practice, learning, and place-making activity from across the university community, addressing issues such as the causes and consequences of socio-economic exclusion, precarious communities, inclusive growth, and equality of opportunity. The aim is to inform policy and interventions that deliver local, regional, and national impact for marginalised communities across Sunderland, the wider North East, and the UK.

The Institute draws on the University's long-standing and deep commitment to widening participation and equality. It also reflects and strengthens the University's impactful and wide-ranging research excellence from across all faculties as well as its extensive external partnerships with public, private, and third sector organisations, not least its links to the council. Underpinning all of this is a uniquely community-led practice-based approach to understanding the long-standing and pervasive issues of economic and social exclusion.

The combination of these factors allows IESI to bring a new voice to national and regional policy debates on these topics and to inform new approaches and innovative policy solutions.

IESI was born out of recognition of the pressures faced by residents in Sunderland. The cost-of-living crisis, rising inequality, and the need to address economic and social inclusion have all become high-profile in recent years, with a prominent focus on policy to tackle these challenges. Sunderland and the wider region have been extensively impacted by uneven economic and social opportunity, affected further by wider global factors. Against this backdrop of rising inequality, economic and social inclusion is morally compelling and socially urgent and is a core priority of the university and indeed the city council.

Creating IESI in Sunderland provides an opportunity to build on existing partnerships and to grow the university's local, regional, and national influence and impact, as well as having an immediate, sustained, and meaningful impact on marginalised and excluded communities.

IESI research will inform practice and vice versa. Areas of core focus include inclusive learning – intersections of disadvantage and the education system; inclusive living – housing, identity, social cohesion; inclusive work – pathways to employment, working practice, exploitative employment and the intersections between socio-economic factors and public health.

And already, the research and capability of the university is driving the actions of the local authority in tackling some of the most pressing challenges it faces around public health.

The University and the Council have been working together on a number of research informed projects, to improve the health and wellbeing of residents in Sunderland.

Sunderland's poor health outcomes are well-understood by the local authority, and it is therefore a strategic priority of the council to deliver a step-change in this space. Longstanding health issues mean that people in Sunderland live shorter lives with more years in poor health. Healthy life expectancy is a measure of how many years of life a person can expect to be in good health for and provides a useful indicator to understand the health of older adults and how a population will ex-

perience older age, as well as the potential need for health and social care support. Healthy life expectancy in Sunderland for men in 2018-20 was 56.1 years and for women it was 56.9 years, significantly less than England's averages of 63.1 years and 63.9 years respectively. As such, this poses significant challenges not only to the health and social care sector but also to economic challenges for employability and business growth.

Sunderland also has eight out of the 225 neighbourhoods defined nationally as 'left behind' neighbourhoods. These are areas that experience a combination of social and economic deprivation. When looking at life expectancy within wards in Sunderland, it ranges from 70.2 years to 81.3 years for men and between 75.8 years and 86.6 years for women.

It is these significant challenges that have seen the council explore how more proactive collaboration with organisations like the university can enable them to deliver better-informed services, that are based on best-practice and grounded in a deep understanding of the specific health barriers faced by communities across the city.

Currently, the City Council is working with the University on a project that has seen embedded researchers placed within the local authority. The researchers are working to understand some of the issues that residents in the city face when it comes to their health and wellbeing and are exploring how the council can best tai-

lor its approach and delivery to meet the specific needs of Sunderland's population.

It is this important civic role that the University of Sunderland plays that is driving mutual benefit for the city and the institution – and importantly, its students. Through embedded practice, the research undertaken by the University's students and academics has potential for real life impact and to make a difference to the residents of Sunderland, as well as supporting the Council to become more research active.

As the partnership is strengthened between the city and its University, there are more collaborative opportunities coming to the fore. Sunderland is now actively exploring opportunities to actuate its high street with health and wellbeing support services that will enable residents to access the support they need to live a better quality of life. A collaborative approach is being adopted between the City Council, Foundation Trust, Business Improvement District and the University, to look at how the retail core of the city can provide more accessible provision of healthcare services that establish the city centre as a destination for more reasons. This innovative approach to improving the lives of local people, while still advancing the Council's own aims of delivering a more vibrant and dynamic city centre, is just one of a comprehensive range of ways that joined-up thinking between these two important organisations is positively impacting on the lives of people who live, work and study in

Sunderland.

Reputational change

As an organisation with global reach and impact, the University's ability to impact positively on the reputation of Sunderland cannot be underestimated, and – in return – the role of the University in attracting students and businesses to the city is significant.

The University and Council have long been partners when it comes to profiling Sunderland and driving positive reputational change inside the city, beyond across the North East and nationally and internationally too.

Sunderland is a city that is experiencing a seismic shift in its landscape, driven by sweeping regeneration that may be led by the Council, but it is well-supported by the University, which itself is pushing ahead with a £100m investment programme to improve its estates. The University is one of the founding partners responsible for the establishment of a city communications network, that seeks to harness the audiences of key city stakeholders to speak in one, united voice about the vision for Sunderland and the brilliant reasons to live, work, study, invest in and enjoy the city. Driven by a collective desire to positively promote Sunderland, the group collaborates in many ways and the University and Council remain core partners, driving the agenda and delivering demonstrable change. A good example of this has been

collaboration when it comes to Freshers Week, when the entire city has been able to get behind University-led plans to welcome new students to Sunderland.

Both organisations know and fully embrace the interconnectivity between the city's reputation as a place to live and study and the economic and social outlook of Sunderland. There is an ongoing and concerted effort to collaborate in this regard, as well as to use effective partnerships to tackle some of the more pressing issues that the city faces, most notably around cohesion and belonging in the wake of national riots in summer 2024, when Sunderland was one of the cities caught up in the unrest that swept across the UK.

With a diverse community, made up of students from more than 123 nationalities including Nigeria, Romania, China and India, international students make up 39.5% of the University's student population, bringing rich cultural diversity and significant economic benefits to Sunderland. Indeed, international students contribute more than £150m of net benefit to the Sunderland economy every year, supporting local businesses and jobs. So, the imperative to not only create a safe, welcoming city for them – but to clearly communicate this to an audience from around the world – is vital to the success of the University and also to Sunderland at large. That's why a major stream of work is now underway to explore how Sunderland can rebuild its reputation and strengthen cohesion among its diverse communities, led by the City Council but

fully embraced and supported by the University of Sunderland.

In summary

Sunderland City Council and the University of Sunderland's ever strengthening partnership is a fundamental building block in the cities social, economic and cultural renaissance.

Across its city development, health, communications and smart city directorates, the local authority not only engages, but co-creates strategies with the University that will strengthen Sunderland's position as a place to study and build a successful life. It is this full-systems approach to city transformation that makes Sunderland a place to watch, a city with a bright future that will realise its ambitions by unlocking the power of effective collaboration.

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